Israel's Contested Identity and the Mediterranean

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Introduction

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), launched at the Barcelona Conference in November 1995, is an interesting attempt to engineer a shared identity, namely a *Mediterranean identity*, among the participating parties.[1] Based on a region-building approach, the Partnership aims at fostering peace and stability in the European Union's Mediterranean periphery through the promotion of common interests, values, and a shared identification. With it, the EMP initiative seeks to interfere in how the participating states define themselves.

After the beginning of a peace process between Israel and its neighbours at the beginning of the 1990s, the EMP aimed at supporting the path of change on which many states in the area had started to embark. Yet after the outbreak of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* in October 2000 and the subsequent collapse of the Middle East peace process, the prospects for the emergence of a shared Mediterranean identity are bleak. However, by focusing on Israel, this paper argues that there are important *domestic* constraints to the adoption of a Mediterranean identity, which have been significant long before the peace process collapsed. In fact, the EMP's 'Mediterranean option', which is a complex attempt to manipulate Israel's identity, directly touches upon domestically disputed questions. Thus, this paper argues that Israel cannot engage in being part of a Mediterranean region as long as it has not sorted out what kind of state and society it wants to be. Finally, the impact of September 11 on Israel's perception of 'us' and 'them', along with its relevance for the future of Euro-Mediterranean region-building, will be discussed.

I. Region-building, identity, and the Mediterranean theme

1. Theoretical considerations

The declared aim of the EMP – or Barcelona process – is to turn *the Mediterranean region* into an area of peace, stability and prosperity.[2] To be sure, the launching of the EMP was not an altruistic gesture, but clearly followed the strategic considerations of the different participants. Yet the *means* adopted by the EU for seeking to achieve its aims – mainly stability in its southern periphery in order to secure its energy supply, reduce unwanted immigration, and increase its economic influence – were rather unconventional. This is particularly the case if compared to traditional, American-dominated approaches to regional stability. Although it is questionable whether the EMP's logic was the result of a thorough analysis in Brussels, it rests on the attempts to forge a region, namely a *Mediterranean* region. At present, this idea may seem surrealistic, yet back in 1995 the prospects were quite different than they are today. Indeed, the end of the Cold War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the beginning of the peace process in the Middle East (Madrid 1991, Oslo 1993) seemed to provide the appropriate conditions for seeking to support peace and stability in the southern Mediterranean through a region-building approach.

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[1] Besides the EU, the EMP's participating parties are Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Cyprus, and Malta. In the meantime, Turkey, Malta and Cyprus have been accepted as future EU member states.
[2] See European Commission (1995): *Barcelona Declaration Adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference, November 27-28,* Barcelona, 28 November 1995, final version.

Three main elements characterise this approach: First, the EMP aims at creating a free trade *area* between the EU and the southern Mediterranean. Thus, it is based on a truly regional design, in which economics, i.e. trade and aid, are the main incentives for region-building. Second, while acknowledging the importance of civil society, the EMP seeks to establish an extensive network of regional co-operation in its three baskets, involving different segments of politics and society.[3] Third, although the existence of a Mediterranean region is questionable, the EMP has been treating it as axiomatic. This goes hand in hand with the promotion of common cultural themes and a shared *Mediterranean* identity as basis for peace and stability in the long term. From this perspective, the Barcelona process can be read as an attempt to construct a "security community", to use Karl Deutsch's expression. It is anchored in the rationale that alliances and security regimes are based on common values and shared identifications.[4]

In its political discourse, the EU has been promoting the 'Mediterranean theme' quite extensively – at least until the breakdown of the Middle East peace process. Prominent images of the Mediterranean include the 'cradle of civilisations', the 'birthplace of the three monotheistic religions', or the 'area of cross-cultural fertilisation'. Similarly, Fernand Braudel's seminal work on the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II, stipulating unity and cultural coherence of the Mediterranean region, is repeatedly reminded in the proceedings of the Barcelona process.[5] Besides these images, the EU has also constantly been emphasising that all participants share *common interests,* namely stability, security, and prosperity.[6] These 'common interests' are obviously defined in quite different ways by the different parties, but the 'rule of the game', after all, is to emphasise what the EU and all the southern EMP participants have in common.

Another rule of the EMP's region-building attempt is to explicitly refer to southern EMP participants as "Mediterranean" or "southern Mediterranean" states, much unlike most of them referred to themselves before the start of the Barcelona process and afterwards. This may seem a marginal matter of semantics. Yet attempts to alter the self-definition of a state is a highly political issue. Based on extensive scholarly research, it can be argued that political identities are the basis of states and 'nations', as they legitimise state authority as well as the very existence of states in the international arena. While employing integrating symbols, myths and historical narratives, identities lend internal cohesion to states and 'nations' by drawing the border between 'us' and 'them'. This implies that the definition of 'us' is dependent on the definition of 'them' and *vice versa*. And although the political identity of a state does not *cause* specific policies, it "makes some action legitimate and intelligible and others not so".[7] In a similar vein, identities

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[3] Regional co-operation includes a wide array of regular meetings and projects within each of the three baskets (Basket I: Security and Political Partnership; Basket II: Economical Partnership, Basket III: Partnership on Human and Social Affairs). The different levels of politics and society range from ministers, government officials, semi-official institutions and universities to civil society organisations. In recent documents, the "improvement of the mutual understanding among the peoples of the region and the development of an active civil society" are listed as one of three main aims of the Partnership. European Commission, 2000, p. 4.

[4] For theoretical foundations and empirical research see Deutsch et al., 1957; Adler and Barnett (eds.), 1998; Wendt, 1994, and various contributions in Katzenstein (ed.), 1996.

[5] See Braudel, 1972. This may be read as the attempt to found a Mediterranean historical narrative.

[6] For the EU's narrative, see the various speeches of EU representatives as well as the EMP documents at the EU's official website <www.europa.eu.int>, "External Relations". For the proceedings, see for example Fondation Méditerranéenne d'Études Stratégiques et al., 1997.

[7] Barnett, 1999, p. 10.

influence the perception of reality. Since political identities are not *a priori* given, but "cultural artefacts of particular kinds"[8], they may be altered. In fact, collective identities are in a permanent process of formation, maintenance, and modification over time.[9] In the case of the Barcelona process, the attempts to alter the identity of the southern participants has come from outside, as the main promoter of the Mediterranean theme has been the EU. Yet the EMP still seeks to interfere into the shaping of boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. With it, the Mediterranean theme potentially touches upon the logic on which a state's internal cohesion is based, the legitimacy of state authority, along with the its domestic and foreign policy.

2. The Mediterranean and its implications for Israel

As applying to all the participating countries in the Maghreb and Mashreq, the EMP's promotion of a *Mediterranean identity theme* represents an important effort to alter Israel's self-definition at large. Yet according to the underlying logic of the EMP – at least as far as the EU understands it – the Mediterranean theme has a number of implications for Israel's self-definition. Three points deserve special attention. First, the EU's Euro-Mediterranean vision anticipates dramatically altered relations between Israel and its Arab neighbours – which include Israel's traditional 'enemies'. In the short term, the EMP logic is based on some sort of ongoing peace negotiations, along with the commitment of the parties involved in the conflict to achieve peace in spite of all difficulties. In the long run, the Mediterranean theme presupposes the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian state. In the very long run, it envisages peaceful coexistence and some degree of regional economic integration, which rely on the ongoing process of confidence-building and increasingly constructive regional relations.

Second, the Barcelona process seeks to redefine 'Israel's place in the region' and to anchor Israel's self-perception in its geographic surroundings, namely 'the Mediterranean'. Geography is often an element of a state's identity[10], but the question still remains of how the geographical location is defined. In addition, the question of 'which region' (if any) is related to prevailing cultural and historical themes. More than this, for Israel this question directly concerns the type of favoured relations to Israel's 'other' – which are its geographic neighbours.

Third, the EMP implicitly seeks to redefine Israel's relations to the EU, as the Euro-Mediterranean logic implies a stronger political, economic, and cultural role of the EU in the region.[11] In addition, the EU's narrative of designating Israel as 'southern Mediterranean country' entails a 'normalisation' of EU-Israeli relations themselves. The EU Commission certainly exaggerated when declaring that within the EMP, "[m]ultilateralism is now as common as, and even prevalent over, traditional bilateral approaches"[12]. Yet terming Israel a 'southern

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[8] Anderson, 1991, p. 4.
[9] Among the vast literature on collective and political identities, see for example Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Sherif, 1966; Norton, 1988; Anderson, 1991; Hogg and Abrams (eds.), 1993; and Wendt, 1994.
[10] Bernard Lewis made this point in a presentation on "Defining the 'Other'", International Conference on "Israel, the Middle East and Islam – Weighing the Risks and Prospects", organised by the Harry S. Truman Institute Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 5-6 March 2002.
[11] Whether and how the EU would have to change itself in order to be part of the Euro-Mediterranean region is an interesting question, but this aspect shall not be considered here.
[12] European Commission, 2000, p. 15.

Mediterranean country' still implies that Israel becomes one among several 'partners' of the EU on the *southern* side of the Mediterranean Sea.

3. Israel and the Mediterranean logic

The launching of the EMP in November 1995 coincided with Israel's peace-making efforts, for which the Israeli government had explicitly requested the EU's assistance.[13] As Shimon Peres had declared, "[w]e hope Europe will play a genuine role in this historic attempt to construct a new Middle East."[14] While Israel could only benefit from EU-sponsored economic development and democratisation throughout the region, the EMP corresponded to Israel's objectives. Its vision for the Mediterranean was compatible with Israel's attempts to build a 'new Middle East'.

Israel has been drawn into an impressive number of EMP projects over the years. The EMP has indeed facilitated Euro-Mediterranean co-operation and meetings among politicians, businesspeople, academics, youth, and different civil society actors. At large, however, the EMP's region-building endeavour remained influenced by the fate of the peace process. Many Arab states have been reluctant to engage in a process that entails the 'normalisation' of relations with Israel against the backdrop of the recurrent derailments of the peace process over the years. Yet even after the outbreak of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* in October 2000 and the end of the peace process, projects involving Israeli and Palestinian and/or other Arab participants have been continuing.[15]

But over time, the EMP also highlighted Israel's difficulties to adjust to the Mediterranean logic, for which, at first sight, there are pragmatic reasons. Three points deserve special attention here. First, the separation between the EMP and the peace process was a condition *sine qua non* for Israel's participation in the EMP from the start. In view of Israel's traditional reservations towards the Europeans, it had no interest in replacing the main broker of the peace process, i.e. the US, with the EU, or in having a stronger European interference in matters of peace and war.[16] The Barcelona Declaration stipulates a separation between the two processes, thus respecting the Israeli position. Yet Israel's demand for separation has not been shared by other EMP participants, and has remained unrealistic and somewhat illogical, as developments have shown.

Herewith related is the second point, which concerns the role of the EU in the 'Mediterranean region under construction'. After the beginning of Oslo, the EU increased its financial assistance to the Palestinians and its political involvement in the region, while it *de facto* started to define the peace process as an area of its "Mediterranean policy".[17] As long as the peace process was proceeding and the Israeli Labour party was in power, this development did not face much resistance in Israel. Yet in view of recurrent derailments of the peace process, the EU's

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[13] For a more detailed analysis of Israel's participation in the Barcelona process see Del Sarto and Tovias, 2001.

[14] "Address in the Knesset by Foreign Minister Peres Welcoming European Parliamentary Assembly Council President Martinez, 24 January 1993", in Medzini (ed.), 1995, Vol. 13-14: 1992-1994, Document 52, pp. 166-168; quote on p. 168. On the EU-Israeli rapprochement after the start of the peace process see also Sachar, 1999, p. 342 ff.

[15] This concerns meetings and projects involving different political and societal actors. On this issue see the EU's website at <www.eu.int/comm/external_relations/med_mideast/euromed_news>; accessed 15 November 2001.

[16] See Alpher, 1998; on Israeli-European relations see Sachar, 1999, Ahiram and Tovias (eds.), 1995; and Greilsammer, 1981.

[17] The EU's declarations on the Middle East peace process are part of the EU's electronic publications on the EMP, such as the *Euromed Report.* In addition, speeches of senior EU officials have recurrently made this link. As one Israeli Foreign Ministry official has put it, Israel became used to the fact that EU Special Envoy to the Middle East, Miguel Angel Moratinos, was to be seen on almost every picture of Middle Eastern political events.

voicing of its political opinions repeatedly caused discord, particularly after the *Likud*-led coalition under Binyamin Netanyahu was elected.[18] At large, Israel has remained sceptical towards the EU's intentions, commitment, and impartiality.[19]

The third point concerns the EU's narrative of subsuming its bilateral trade relations to southern Mediterranean countries – Israel included – under the 'Euro-Mediterranean headline'.[20] In view of Israel's advanced economic relations with the EU, Israel distinguishes between the bilateral ties and the Barcelona process, whose economic benefits are limited for Israel. Stressing Israel's dissimilarity with a southern Mediterranean economy, the Israeli Finance Ministry disapproves of Israel being classified as a *southern Mediterranean country*. Similarly, Israel feels uncomfortable with the EMP's underlying north-south approach, expressed in the allocation of development aid to most southern Mediterranean countries – Israel excluded. Thus, Israel's Finance Ministry would prefer to divide the EMP participants into '16 and 11', instead of '15' (EU member countries) and '12' (southern Mediterranean countries), or at least have Israel's 'special status' acknowledged, as the EU had done in the past.[21]

At large, Israel feels quite uncomfortable with the EMP's Mediterranean region-building logic. From an Israeli perspective, political and economic reforms in its neighbourhood are not dependent on the peace process, and being considered a 'Mediterranean country' disregards Israel's 'European-type' political and economic features. In spite of having participated in the Partnership for several years, Israel had not internalised the EMP's underlying principles, and it has lacked of a strategy towards the Mediterranean.[22] Indeed, even before the peace process broke down, the EMP did not figure among Israel's foreign policy preoccupations and in its discourse, and the Mediterranean theme was not the subject of any broad public debate either.

II. Israel's Contested identity: The Domestic Scene

Suggesting that the 'pragmatic reasons' that apparently explain Israel's lack of strategy towards the Mediterranean have a much deeper dimension, the discussion will focus on Israel's identity. What are Israel's main defining themes? And what are the domestic fault-lines? The underlying

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[18] For instance, the EU's 1997 Luxembourg Declaration that called on Israel to show more flexibility in order to reinvigorate the peace process was decisively rejected by Israel. The EU's March 1999 statement defining Jerusalem as *corpus separatum* in accordance with the 1947 UN partition plan – thus denying Israel's sovereignty over the city – met on outrage in Israel and prompted an official complaint before the summoned European ambassadors. See "Ministry of Foreign Affair's Response to the Luxembourg Declaration, December 13, 1997", at the Israeli Foreign Ministry's website <www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0ep90>; and "Reaction by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Sharon on the EU Statement on Jerusalem, 25 March 1999", at <www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0h7j0>, both accessed 25 August 2001.

[19] For more on this issue, see Del Sarto and Tovias, 2001; and Alpher, 1998.

[20] For example, the EU termed Israel's updated free trade agreement of November 1995 in the last round of negotiations "Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement" and stressed publicly that this agreement would contribute to Mediterranean region-building. See "EU, Israel Sign Accord, See it Paving Way for Co-operation", *AP*, 20 November 1995. As the 1975 bilateral trade agreement had already stipulated a free trade regime in industrial goods between the two sides, this claim is doubtful.

[21] Dan Catarivas, Deputy Director General of the International Affairs Department, Israeli Ministry of Finance, has repeatedly made this point in conferences on the Barcelona process. The EU's 1994 Essen Declaration had indeed stressed Israel's 'special status'. See Extracts of the Conclusions of the Presidency of the Essen European Council, 9 and 10 December 1994, *Bulletin of the European Union*, Supplement 2/95, p. 28.

[22] Senior EU officials have publicly regretted Israel's lack of strategy and input towards the Mediterranean in conferences and seminars on Israel and the EMP.

assumption of the following discussion is that identity themes and perceptions are 'real'. The primary aim of the following considerations is not to assess the legitimacy or validity of identities and perceptions, but to explain why Israel perceives itself and others the way it does.

1. Defining themes and boundaries

The identity of the State of Israel evolves around five main themes, most of which are linked to each other: Zionism, the Holocaust, the 'Jewish State', the principle of self-reliance, and the identification with the US.

Zionism – As main intellectual driving force for the establishment of Israel, political Zionism has remained "the root cultural paradigm of Israeli political culture"[23] until present. Emerging in Eastern Europe from the mid-19th century on, political Zionism was a reaction to persisting anti-Semitism, while it represented the Jewish form of nationalism, expressing aspirations for self-determination and the revival of a rich Jewish history. Accordingly, the Zionist narrative forged a continuity between the biblical past and the present, which also served the aim of legitimising Jewish statehood in Palestine.[24] Yet with Zionism's emphasis on the biblical past, Israel's identity became implicitly linked to 'Ancient Israel', and to Jewish religion.

The Holocaust - Zionism's main aim, namely to establish a *state of the Jews* [25] acquired a particular importance after the Holocaust, as it provided the most tragic evidence that even assimilation or conversion were no guarantee for avoiding persecution and death of Europe's Jewish minorities. Thus, aiming at being a 'safe haven' for Jews all over the world, the State of Israel perceived itself as having "a unique mission, unique at last in contemporary history, a mission which gives it its *raison d'être*"[26], as David Ben-Gurion put it. The Holocaust became and has remained one of the core elements of Israel's identity. With it, Zionism's defining feature, namely encouraging Jewish immigration from all over the world (*aliyah* – literally ascension)*,* has maintained its ideological importance until present.[27]

The 'Jewish State' - The "*identity of the state* was constructed as 'Jewish' by means of various symbols, such as a flag, the national anthem, its history, as well as the official days of celebration and memorial."[28] While the right to belong to the Israeli collective was extended to Jews all over the world, Israel's political leaders have repeatedly portrayed themselves as "the representative of the Jewish people"[29]. Since Israel was conceived as a country of Jewish immigration, the focus on *Jewishness* as main identity theme also derived from the need to

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[23] Myron J. Aronoff: "The Origins of Israeli Political Culture", in Sprinzak and Diamond (eds.), 1993, pp. 47-63; quote on p. 49. On Zionism see also Avineri, 1981.

[24] See Zerubavel, 1995; see also Weissbrod 1997, pp. 48 ff.

[25] This would be the correct translation of the title of Theodor Herzl's book *Der Judenstaat*, and not, as often claimed and generally translated into other languages, "The Jewish State".

[26] "Report to the State Council by Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Ben-Gurion, 22 July 1948", in Medzini (ed.), 1976, Vol. 1-2: 1947-1974, Section I: The War of Independence, Document 16, pp. 153-155; quote on p. 154.

[27] In practical terms, Israel's immigration law grants Israeli citizenship to every Jewish immigrant, as well as to his or her spouse, children, grandchildren and the spouses of the latter, as well as to converts and their spouses. As argued elsewhere, the issue of immigration indicates the profound differences between national and state identity in Israel and Europe. See Raffaella A. Del Sarto: "Israeli Identity as Seen Through European Eyes", in Avineri and Weidenfeld (eds.), 1999, pp. 59-79.

[28] Kimmerling, 1993, p. 411, his italics.

[29] "Address by Prime Minister Rabin to the United Nations General Assembly, 24 October 1995", at the official website of Israel's Foreign Ministry <www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH01kp0>, accessed 12 September 2001.

integrate a culturally heterogeneous Jewish Diaspora.[30] At large, *the state of the Jews* became tantamount to *the Jewish State* – although both things are not necessarily the same.[31]

'Self-Reliance' - Emphasising the idea of actively influencing fate, the early Zionist narrative linked myths of Jewish armed resistance from the biblical past to those of the pre-state era through the theme of the 'few against the many'.[32] Reinforced by the trauma of the Holocaust and an increasingly hostile political environment, this perception gave rise to the principle of self-reliance, i.e. the political autonomy and military ability to respond effectively to security threats. As much as Ben-Gurion maintained in 1948 that "[w]e must not forget that our security depends on our own might"[33], Ariel Sharon asserted in 2001 that "we must all know that we can never place our fate in the hands of anyone else".[34] Thus, the principle of 'trust no one' is much closer to Israel's self-perception than the concept of multilateralism.

Identification with the US - Israel's strategic relations with the United States, which deepened from the 1970s on, are perceived as being based on similar values, such as "the American ideal of justice and the ideals of peace and democracy that our nations adhere to"[35]. At the same time, Israel has recurrently emphasised its democratic political system and adherence to 'Western' values in its foreign policy discourse. Yet while seeing itself as "a non-Arab island in an Arab Middle East"[36], Israel's 'Western' orientation also draws a cognitive border to 'the Arab world' and accentuates Israel's *difference* to its Middle Eastern environment.

Israel's definition of 'us' and 'them' evolves around these five central themes. While Jewish history had nurtured suspicion towards the 'Gentiles', the threats of Arab leaders to destroy Israel and the international inactivity prior to the 1967 War reinforced Israel's distrust of other states, while prompting fears of a possible repetition of the Holocaust. Israel's almost-defeat in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and its aftermath strengthened the concept of 'a nation that shall dwell alone'.[37] It also reinforced Israel's perception that since its founding, the state was forced to defend itself out of 'no choice' (*ein breira)* in the persisting conflict with its neighbours.[38] Recurrent

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[30] According to the original Zionist project, Jewish immigration would lead to a Jewish majority in a future sovereign state. Only few of the early Zionists took notice that another, non-Jewish population was living in what was to become the State of Israel. Similarly, only few assumed that not all of the Jews living in the Diaspora were to immigrate to the 'Jewish homeland'. See for example Morris, 1999. Yet the need for a *national* identity also prompted the adoption of 'new' integrating themes. See for example Evron, 1995, pp. 101 ff.

[31] A 'State of the Jews' may be secular and democratic, in which the majority of its citizens are Jewish. Conversely, 'a Jewish State' seems to imply the institutionalisation of Jewish religion, and may thus contradict secular and democratic values. As Evron argues, a 'Jewish State' entails the preferential treatment of the Jewish ethnic-religious group – whose members do not even need to be citizens – over non-Jewish citizens. See Evron, 1995, pp. 188 ff.

[32] See Zerubavel, p. 218 ff., and Geertz, 1984.

[33] "David Ben-Gurion, Broadcast to the Nation, May 15, 1948", at <www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00yd0>, accessed 20 August 2001. The principle of self-reliance stands behind the investment in a strong and technologically advanced army, compulsory conscription and a large reserve force. See Inbar, 1996; and Dan Horowitz: "The Israeli Concept of National Security", in Yaniv (ed.), 1993, pp. 11-53.

[34] Ariel Sharon in an interview (Ari Shavit: "Sharon Is Sharon Is Sharon", Interview with Ariel Sharon), *Ha'aretz Magazine,* English Edition, 13 April 2001, pp. 10-15; quote on p. 12.

[35] "Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Rabin, 3 June 1974", in Medzini (ed.), 1976, Vol. 1-2: 1947-1974, Section XII: The Yom Kippur War and Aftermath, Document 31, pp. 1136-1143; quote on p. 1142.

[36] Alpher, 1995, p. 130.

[37] See Sandler, 1993, p. 146 ff. On this issue see also Arian, 1995.

[38] However, Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon prompted mass demonstrations against what the protesters perceived as Israel's first 'war of choice'. In recent years, Israel's 'new historians' have challenged the prevailing narrative that Israel had always been victim to Arab aggression and acted out of self-defence. See, for example Morris, 1999.

international criticism of Israel's policy over the decades was discerned as disguised or open anti-Semitism, and fostered the perception that 'the whole world is against us' – the US excluded. Thus, the historical experience combined with the persistent conflict with the 'Arab world' entailed a definition of 'the other' – 'Gentiles' in general, and more particular, 'the Arabs', while reinforcing Israel's main identity themes, including its *Jewish* identity.[39] These boundaries and narratives also fostered a defiant, and basically 'realist' foreign policy.

2. Divisions and fault lines

The questions of what Israel shall be, where it should be founded, and which territory it shall comprise prompted discussions within the Zionist movement from the outset. However, in view of the almost simultaneous tasks of building a state and building a 'nation', Israel's core integrating elements were left ambiguous – such as 'Jewishness', and 'the Jewish State'. Over the years, however, and often triggered by specific developments, these ambiguities gave rise to partly incompatible concepts of Israel's identity. At present, Israeli society and politics are characterised by four main fault lines, which cut across each other.

The territorial-political axis: Eretz Israel versus Medinat Israel
Reflecting the traditional divisions within the Zionist movement, this axis invokes two concepts, namely *Eretz Israel,* i.e. the biblical 'Land of Israel', and *Medinat Israel,* i.e. the Jewish and democratic State of Israel.[40] While the concept of *Medinat Israel* dominated the first decades of statehood in accordance with the aspirations of Labour Zionism, the 1967 conquest of land that was part of 'biblical Israel' provided a material basis for the ascent of the concept of *Eretz Israel.*[41] Expressing the perception of rightful Jewish claims on 'biblical land', the construction of Jewish settlements in the conquered territories intensified after the 1977 elections, which ended the dominance of the Labour Party.[42] Yet as the first *Intifada* made disturbingly visible, Israel's *de facto* rule over the Palestinian population created a dilemma of democracy versus Jewish majority in the long run.[43] With the beginning of Oslo and the option of territorial compromise, the rift between supporters of *Eretz Israel* and *Medinat Israel* deepened to an unprecedented degree, the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in November 1995 being the most dramatic evidence.

The concept of *Eretz Israel* stresses the bond between 'biblical territory' and the Jewish people. According to its secular version, as represented by the *Likud* party and some ultra-

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[39] These boundary-formations do not follow a black-and-white pattern, as the example of the US shows. In addition, some groups among 'the Arabs' became Israel's allies, such the Druze inside the Green Line, who are being drafted into the Israeli Army until present. Yet this does not mean that they are full members of the 'we-group'.

[40] Unlike Labour Zionism, revisionist Zionism supported the maximal congruity between the State of Israel and the biblical 'Land of Israel'. Thus, it shared a basic belief with *religious Zionism,* which perceived the creation of the state as the beginning of a divine redemption process. See for example Avineri, 1981.

[41] The conquest of 'biblical land' – and particularly East Jerusalem that was immediately annexed to the State of Israel – affected a majority of Jewish Israelis, religious and secular alike. See for example Evron, 1995, p. 228.

[42] Unlike the *Herut,* and later *Likud* governments, the previous Labour governments had carefully avoided establishing Jewish 'security settlements' in densely populated areas. For an overview of the settlement activities of Israeli governments since 1967 see Sandler, 1993, pp. 205 and 212.

[43] Keeping the territories while enforcing democracy means to grant equal citizenship rights to the Palestinian population. But in this case, and in view of the higher birth rate of the Palestinians at large, Israel would loose its Jewish majority in the long term. This is certainly one of the reasons why the West Bank and Gaza have never been annexed to the state, but kept as a sort of settler-colony, certainly not reflecting democratic principles.

nationalist parties in Israeli politics, Jewish sovereignty over 'biblical territory' is essential for Israel's Jewish *national* character. The *religious* version of *Eretz Israel* interprets Jewish sovereignty over the territories as the divinely inspired 'Return to the Promised Land'. Defended mainly by the National-Religious Party (NRP) in Israeli politics, this orientation opposes the relinquishing of territories on religious grounds.[44] Conversely, the concept of *Medinat Israel,* as promoted mainly by the Labour Party, is compatible with territorial compromise, as it prefers maintaining a Jewish majority without infringing on democratic principles.[45] Differing from this pragmatic position, some supporters of *Medinat Israel* (e.g. fractions of *Meretz* or Israel's peace movement) also condemn Israel's occupation of the territories on mainly *moral* grounds.

But besides the territorial dimension that separates what is commonly termed Israel's political 'Right from the 'Left, this axis also invokes two different sets of values. Presupposing the endless persecution of Jews and the permanence of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the narrative of *Eretz Israel* evolves around the principle of 'no choice'. Entailing a quite gloomy perception of Israel's place in the region, 'security' becomes a supreme value.[46] In addition, *Eretz Israel* is a basically nationalist concept, which, by definition, promotes particularism and a collectivist concept of state identity. In its religious version, this feature is even more pronounced, as the theme of the 'chosen people' conveys.[47] Conversely, the concept of *Medinat Israel* considers universalistic democratic values as more important than national-religious considerations appertaining to territory, although it still assumes that the state shall first serve the interests of the Jewish collective.[48] It is important to note, however, that there are also religious Jewish Israelis who adhere to these principles, represented for instance by the small *Meimad* party in Israeli politics.[49] Another orientation of *Medinat Israel* puts a stronger emphasis on individualist and liberal values, and considers secularism, democracy and equality of all Israeli citizens as supreme values. Mainly promoted by the political 'Left', this orientation is often anchored in a humanistic interpretation of Jewish religion, and still supports the idea of a Jewish majority and the principle of Jewish immigration.[50]

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[44] See the official web site of the NRP (*Mafdal* in Hebrew) at <www.hamafdal.org.il/Mi_anachnu.htm> (in Hebrew), accessed 12 August 2001. This web site has currently been shut down, due to lack of payment, as it says.

[45] According to former Prime Minister Ehud Barak "any type of full control by Israel over the whole area from the Mediterranean to the Jordan […] means inevitably either a binational state, if it is democratic and so non-Jewish; or an apartheid state, which is non-democratic." "Remarks by Foreign Minister Barak to the International Press Institute, 27 March 1996", at <www.mfa.gov.il//mfa/go.asp?MFAH1hr0>, accessed 12 September 2001.

[46] See for example Arian, 1995, p. 230 ff. Current Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, for instance, is convinced that Israel's War of Independence has not ended yet. Ariel Sharon in an interview (Ari Shavit: "Sharon Is Sharon Is Sharon", Interview with Ariel Sharon), *Ha'aretz Magazine,* English Edition, 13 April 2001, pp. 10-15.

[47] See also Ilan Peleg: "The Peace Process and Israel's Political Culture", in Dowty et al. (eds.), 1997, pp. 13-24. The extra-parliamentary settler movement *Gush Emunim* goes even further and views the isolation of the Jewish people from others as a blessing. See Rubinstein, 1980, p. 120 ff.

[48] The granting of formal citizens' rights to Israel's non-Jewish minorities is viewed as sufficient condition for defining Israel as a democracy.

[49] The *Meimad* is affiliated with the Labour Party in Israeli politics. See for example the party platform at <www.meimad.org.il> (in Hebrew), accessed 3 September 2001.

[50] See *Meretz* party platform at <www.meretz.org.il> (in Hebrew); accessed 13 August 2001. The platform is silent on the question of citizenship and immigration laws applying to the Arab minorities.

The religious-secular divide

The religious-secular divide evolves around the ambiguous concept of the 'Jewish State', along with the notion of *Jewishness* and its inherent link between religion, ethnicity, and nationality.[51] Tensions between religious and secular interpretations of these concepts existed since the founding of the state. Yet with the rise of the concept of *Eretz Israel* in the aftermath of the 1967 War, the friction grew. In the 1990s, the question of how to define 'Jewishness' and 'the Jewish State' became once more salient following the Jewish mass immigration from the former Soviet Union. As a considerable percentage of the new immigrants are not Jewish according to religious law *(Halacha)*, but nevertheless entitled to immigrate to Israel and become citizens under the *secular* immigration law, this immigration brought the incompatibility of religious and secular interpretations of Israel's main defining themes to the fore.[52] With the beginning of the peace process and the option of territorial compromise, the secular-religious divide further intensified.

Yet both the secular and the religious sector are far from being homogenous. As for the secular sector, it includes supporters of *Eretz Israel*, along with defenders of *Medinat Israel* in the sense of a secular *Jewish democracy.* A majority among them endorses Israel's dual legal system and the *status quo.*[53] But it also comprises fervent supporters of secularism and a separation between religion and state, such as defended by the parties *Meretz* and *Shinui.*[54] However, a majority of Jewish Israelis supports the idea that Jewish religious practices shall be a central feature of the state. Yet the religious sector is characterised by different religious customs and degrees of observance, and different positions towards Zionism, the state and its boundaries.[55] Theoretically rejecting the state, ultra-orthodox Jews *(haredim)* grant unconditional supremacy to orthodox *halachic* ruling.[56] On the other hand, religious Zionists recognise the state and the competence of secular courts in civilian matters, but still concede supreme authority to the Rabbinate. Representing a *Mizrahi* version of Jewish orthodoxy, *Shas* – currently the third largest party in parliament – also maintains that the *Halacha* is superior to state law, although its voters are not necessarily orthodox religious.[57] Regarding the issue of territorial compromise, *Shas'* spiritual leader Ovadia Yosef ruled that it is permitted to relinquish territory if this prevents the

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[51] The ambiguity of the concept 'the Jewish State' originates in Zionism's *nationalisation* of Jewish religion and the justification of its territorial claims by relying on the *Torah* – in spite of Zionism's mainly *secular* nature. See Charles S. Liebmann: "Religion and Democracy in Israel", in Sprinzak and Diamond (eds.), 1993, pp. 273-292; here p. 279 ff. The ambiguity of 'Jewishness' is most visible in the fact that Israeli identity cards contain the information of whether its holder is Jewish or not, which is listed under the category *le'um* – nation or nationality.

[52] It is estimated that between 20 and 40 percent of these immigrants are not Jewish according to the *Halacha.* See for example, Shepherd, 1994, pp. 295 ff.

[53] Secular state law applies to most legal affairs, while religious law regulates personal status issues (marriage, divorce, burial etc) and is the basis of laws applying to religious holidays and practices, such as the *Shabbat.*

[54] The main characteristic of *Shinui* is to be anti-religious, while it supports a rather collectivist concept of state identity. See for instance the party platform at <www.shinui.org.il/english.html>; accessed 12 August 2001.

[55] Israel's Jewish population can be subdivided into four groups: ultra-orthodox, religious Zionists, traditional Jews *(masorti'im)* and secular Jews. The third group consists of approximately half of Israel's Jewish citizens (mainly of Oriental origin), who maintain a rather flexible way of religious observance. See Elazar and Sandler, 1997, p. 14 ff.

[56] According to the ultra-orthodox belief, only God can establish Israel after the coming of the Messiah. In practice, the *haredi* sector participates in Israeli politics in order to protect its particular interests.

[57] Besides attracting traditional Jews *(masorti'im)* of mainly Oriental origin, *Shas'* extensive educational and social network appeals to the economically deprived from all Jewish ethnic groups as well as to Arab Israelis of different denominations. See, for example Don-Yehia, 1997; Peretz and Doron, 2000, p. 264 ff.

loss of life (*pikuah nefesh),* and the *Meimad* party adheres to the same principle.[58] While the *Haredi* parties are unclear on the issue, religious Zionists oppose territorial compromise as discussed above.[59]

The Zionist - non-Zionist divide

As much as the founding of Israel represented the transformation of a religious community into a 'nation-state', the state *de facto* included non-Jews, who at present constitute approximately one fifth of Israeli citizens.[60] Influenced by Israel's external conflict at large, Israel's Arab minorities have remained politically and economically disadvantaged in a state that defines itself as Jewish.[61] Particularly against the backdrop of the post-Zionist debate in recent years and its challenge to Israel's prevailing narratives, the question of the 'Jewish State' and its compatibility with liberal democratic principles had started to become a political issue.[62]

Most Jewish Israelis support Zionism and the idea of the 'Jewish State' – however the latter may be defined.[63] Defying this paradigm, a minority of Israelis supports the concept of *Medinat kol Ezraheiha*, i.e. a state of all its citizens. It implies the quest for full equality of all Israeli citizens, irrespective of their religion or ethnicity. According to this concept, there would be no preferential treatment of any group, while the individual citizen would stand at the centre. In fact, this concept calls for abolishing the 'Jewish' character of the state, including its Jewish political symbols, and the replacement of the latter with symbols with which Jewish and non-Jewish Israelis alike may identify. In a similar vein, it favours the abolishment of the principle of Jewish immigration. This concept finds support among Israel's Arab minorities and is promoted by the Arab parties in Israeli politics – although its liberal orientation is in some cases replaced by some sort of 'Arab nationalism' or an Islamist orientation.[64] Yet the concept also attracts Jewish intellectuals of what is commonly termed the 'extreme left'. Most notably, the Arab-Jewish party *Hadash* promotes this concept of state identity,[65] along with fractions of *Meretz*.

Cultural patterns and cognitive regions: The 'Middle East' versus the 'West'

Israel's cultural and regional orientation, along with the resulting cognitive boundaries, is not a settled issue either. Historically, European Jewry (*Ashkenazim)* constituted Israel's ruling class

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[58] For Ovadia Yosef's ruling see for example Shahar Ilan: "Second Only to Joseph Caro", *Ha'aretz, Week's End,* English edition, 6 October 2000, pp. B6-B7. For the *Meimad* party see its website, *op. cit.* (Footnote 49).

[59] The platform of the *haredi* party list United Torah Judaism (UJT) states that all decisions "will be based on rulings of rabbis, taking into consideration the principle of the Land of Israel and the prevention of the loss of life". Quoted after David Zev Harris: "Party Platforms 1999", *The Jerusalem Post,* 11 May 1999, Elections Supplement, p. 4.

[60] In 1999, 79.2 percent of Israel's population were Jewish. Among the 18.6 percent of Arab Israelis, Muslims account for 14.9 percent, Christians for 2.2 percent and Druze for 1.6 percent. The Israeli Ministry of Interior lists the remaining 2.1 percent as not appertaining to any religious category. See Central Bureau of Statistics of Israel, 1999.

[61] See for example Sami Smooha: "Class, Ethnic, and National Cleavages and Democracy in Israel", in Sprinzak and Diamond (eds.), 1993, pp. 309-342; Smooha, 1998; and Kimmerling, 1998.

[62] See for example Elazar and Sandler, 1997; see also Morris, 1999.

[63] Besides the orthodox and ultra-orthodox sectors (which however participate in Israeli politics), the ultra-orthodox *Neturei Kharta* reject Zionism and the state, and do not participate in Israeli politics.

[64] The United Arab List comprises Israel's Islamic Movement, which has clearly different priorities. According to a 1993 survey, 31 percent of Arab respondents were in favour of establishing a Palestinian state in *all of Palestine* according to *shari'a* law. For the results of the survey on the preferences of Arab Israelis, see As'ad Ghanem: "The Palestinians in Israel – Part of the Problem and not the Solution: Their Status if Peace Comes", in Hermann and Yuchtman-Yaar (eds.), 1997, pp. 55-62.

[65] See the *Hadash* party platform at <www.hadash.org.il> (in Hebrew and Arabic); accessed 15 August 2001.

and dominated its political culture during and after the creation of the state. But Jewish immigration from mainly Arab countries in the 1950s and 1960s gave rise to 'Middle Eastern' cultural patterns. With it, the perception that Israel is a 'European-type' country – situated in the Middle East by coincidence only – became increasingly contested.[66] The recent Jewish mass immigration from the former Soviet Union changed the balance once more towards 'European' cultural patterns. But it also woke up the temporarily dormant inter-Jewish fault line against the backdrop of still persisting socio-economic inequalities between *Ashkenazim* and *Mizrahim* in Israeli society, the economic success of the 'Russian' immigrants, as well as the trend among the latter to voice their cultural difference.[67] In addition, Israeli society is characterised by a Jewish-Arab fault line, as the previous paragraph suggested.

In view of the 'European' cultural influence and Israel's political and economic features, many Israelis have difficulties in conceiving Israel as being part of the Middle East. In addition, the concept of the Middle East is associated with wars and conflict. Yet while some perceive that Israel belongs to the 'Western world', 'European' cultural patterns appear alien to Israel's socio-cultural features and its geography for others. According to the latter, Israel belongs to its geographical region, in spite of the conflict with the neighbours. Still others maintain that Israel is neither a 'Middle Eastern' nor a 'Western' country, but a combination of Krakow and Casablanca, as Avineri has put it[68], or a country *sui generis*. The preference for 'Oriental' and 'Western' cultural patterns cuts through different segments of society and political affiliations. However, some political parties promote one orientation or the other. The Russian immigrant parties, for instance, represent a sector that is deeply steeped into East European culture, while *Shas* promotes *Mizrahi* ethnicity and 'Middle Eastern' culture. Similarly, Israel's Arab parties represent another 'Middle Eastern' cultural orientation.

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[66] In view of the unequal distribution of resources and political power between the two 'ethnic groups', the protest of *Mizrahim* against *Ashkenazi* domination counts as important factor explaining the change of government after the 1977 elections.

[67] See for example Shepherd, 1994; Bick, 1997; Kimmerling, 1998; Smooha, 1998. The 'Russian immigration also prompted animosity among Israel's Arab minorities, for quite similar reasons.

[68] Preface by Avineri and Weidenfeld, in Avineri and Weidenfeld (eds.), 1999, *op. cit.,* pp. 5-7, here p. 5.

3. Israel's contested identity: Political implications

Israeli society and politics are highly polarised regarding the question of what the Israeli polity is and is supposed to be, and the polarisation assumes different dimensions. Over the last decade, the religious-secular divide has intensified, evidenced by the increasing strength of religious parties and the continuous decline of the two major secular parties, *Likud* and Labour.[69] At the same time, as long as Oslo was alive, the territorial issue divided Israeli politics into two almost equal camps, often leaving the decision of who will govern the country to 'sectarian' parties.[70] A similar, yet not identical pattern applies to the preference of inclusive and universalistic interpretations of state identity over exclusive and particularistic ones. It positions supporters of *Eretz Israel* and most of the religious parties on one side of the divide, *Meretz,* many representatives of Labour and the Arab parties on the other side of the axis, while leaving a 'grey field' in the middle. The Zionist-non-Zionist divide corresponds largely to the Arab-Jewish division, yet without being congruent with the latter. Finally, the issue of ethnicity, implying both an inter-Jewish fault line and an Arab-Jewish division, overlaps and cuts across the other fault lines. At large, the question of ethnicity has (once more) gained political importance over the last decade.[71]

The multidimensional polarisation of Israeli society has produced fragile parliamentary majorities, along with the need to accommodate the requests of smaller coalition partners. At the same time, coalition partners tend to maintain partly incompatible ideas on domestic and foreign policy. With it, governments may be quite incapable of simultaneously pursuing internal reforms and take important foreign policy decisions.[72] Considering the importance of floating votes, changing preferences of specific parties, and the fact that Israel's identity polarisation clearly transgresses party lines, internal or external events may easily tip the balance. This explains why Israel has witnessed frequent alterations of governments, which have maintained quite different political programs, in the last decade.[73] Accordingly, Israel's self-definition has been quite dissenting. Political leaders have termed Israel 'the Jewish State', along with *Eretz Israel,* and *Medinat Israel.* They have emphasised Israel's affinity with 'the West', and stressed that Israel is condemned to 'dwell alone' – at least in the region. Alternatively, the idea of a 'normal', secular and democratic Israel that is firmly anchored in a (new) Middle East has been promoted.[74]

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[69] See Peretz and Doron, 2000; and Hazan and Rahat, 2000.

[70] This applies to *Shas,* the Russian immigrant party *Israel b'Aliyah,* and the ultra-orthodox UJT, which have entered different coalitions over the last years. See for example Peretz and Doron, 2000.

[71] This is evidenced by the rise and strengthening of *Shas*, and the electoral strength of the Russian immigrant party *Israel B'Alyiah*. The diminishing support of Arab Israeli voters for Zionist parties at the polls has shown that the Arab-Jewish divide has grown deeper. See Peretz and Doron, 2000, pp. 268 ff.; Bick, 1997.

[72] Indeed, former Prime Minister Barak was unable to simultaneously advance the Oslo process – for which he needed *Shas* – and to tackle the promised 'civil revolution', which also entailed the 'containment' of religious power.

[73] Israel went from an extremely 'nationalist' government under Itzhak Shamir to a 'dovish' government under Itzhak Rabin after the 1992 elections. Following Rabin's assassination and Peres' interim government, the 1996 elections brought Binyamin Netanyahu to power, who ran on an – albeit modified – *Eretz Israel* platform (since he *de facto* implemented a further Israeli withdrawal from the territories under agreements signed by the previous government). After the fall of the Netanyahu government, the Labour-dominated coalition under Ehud Barak sought to revive the peace process. After the latter lost its parliamentary support following the outbreak of the second *Intitfada, Likud* chairman Ariel Sharon was elected as Prime Minister (the composition of the *Knesset* remained the same).

[74] See Medzini (ed.), various volumes; see also Barnett, 1999; Peleg in Dowty et al (ed.), 1997, *op. cit.*

III. Israel's contested identity and the 'Mediterranean manipulation'

As a result of Israel's domestic polarisation, Israel faces serious obstacles in pursuing a coherent policy course if question of Israel's identity and its different implications in terms of territory, relations to its traditional 'enemies', and the favoured regional order are involved. Yet the EMP's attempts to manipulate Israel's identity towards a Mediterranean identity undoubtedly involve these questions.

1. Israel's relations to its 'significant other'

Although the peace process has currently ended, its beginning nevertheless marked a turning point. As the Arab-Israeli conflict had been a constant feature of the Israeli collective experience, the prospects of peace arose a strong sense of uncertainty in Israel, as it implied a redefinition of Israel's 'other', including its traditional 'enemies', and thus of its 'self'. At large, the efforts of the Israeli government to embark on the path of peace went hand in hand with attempts to alter Israel's identity. In 1993, Itzhak Rabin stated: "One might say that Arab hostility and political isolation hurt us – we lost our trust in others. We suspected everyone and developed a siege mentality in a sort of political, economic and mental ghetto. […] This new reality, we must be part of it and it obliges us to *revolutionize our thought and behavior patterns* in the coming years."[75] Yet the proposed 'revolution' met on resistance among large segments of Israeli society, and, along with the option of territorial compromise, fuelled fervent domestic discussions on Israel's identity.[76] This development may well be explained in terms of declining external threat that had thus far provided the 'glue' for a fragmented society. More important, however, is that the option of territorial compromise in exchange for peace implied a *need to choose* between competing concepts of Israel's identity. At large, the rift between nationalist and/or religious interpretations of Israel's identity on the one hand, and secular-liberal on the other hand widened most notably.

In view of the fragile parliamentary balance, and the diversity within government coalitions, embarking on redefining Israel's relations to its 'significant other' was bound to face great difficulties even if the peace process had proceeded smoothly. Yet taken the unclear prospects of the latter, coupled with repeated terror attacks in Israel's major cities, fragile majorities were easy to reverse.[77] Since the EMP seeks to reshape Israel's relations with its adversaries, it is easy to see how Israel's contested identity impedes the development of a consistent Euro-Mediterranean strategy *from this perspective*. Although Israel refutes any link of the EMP with the peace process, the former is inherently based on the latter. Israel's contested identity – with all its political implications – makes it almost impossible for Israel to consistently embark on the modification of relations with its 'significant other', and thus of its 'self', in the first place.

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[75] "Address by PM Rabin at the National Defense College, 12 August 1993", in Medzini (ed.), 1995, Vol. 13: 1992-1994, Document 101, pp. 297-300; quote on pp. 298-299, my italics.

[76] Indeed, during the Oslo years, debates on questions related to Israel's identity intensified. See for example Alpher, 1995; Hermann and Yuchtmann-Yaar (eds.), 1997; Newman 1997; Weissbrod, 1997; Dowty et al. (eds.), 1997; and Barnett, 1999.

[77] Some Israeli scholars maintain that the terror attacks during the 1996 electoral campaign were the most important factor explaining the victory of Netanyahu over Peres. See Ehud Sprinzak: "The Shaping of the Israeli Right and Its Current Attitudes", in Dowty et al. (eds.), 1997, pp. 35-39.

2. Israel's 'place in the region'

After the beginning of the peace process, the assessment that Israel is internationally isolated and misunderstood, and regionally threatened, started to change. Itzhak Rabin declared that "[n]o longer are we necessarily 'a people that dwells alone', and no longer is it true that 'the whole world is against us.' We must overcome the sense of isolation that has held us in its thrall for almost half a century."[78] Similarly, former president Ezer Weizman viewed Israel's "ghetto mentality"[79] as a potential obstacle to the peace process, while he reckoned that Israel was never as secure as in the 1990s. This went hand in hand with Peres' idea of an Israel that is firmly anchored in a 'New Middle East'. Yet several identity concepts prevailing at the domestic level oppose any attempts to redefine Israel's 'place in the region' and to become 'a nation like other nations'. These potentially include religious interpretations of state identity – since all religions tend to stress 'uniqueness'. In particular, this regards the belief system of *Haredi* society, which implies the obligation "to close in on itself and to differentiate itself from the world around it".[80] Similarly, it applies to the extreme version of the nationalist-religious credo as endorsed by the settler movement *Gush Emunim*, which favours the international isolation of the state.[81] As for the secular concept of *Eretz Israel,* it is linked to the idea that Israel shall 'live by the sword', at least in the region.[82] This does not necessarily mean that the concept is isolationist in general terms, as many of its supporters may be favourable to economic globalisation and an 'Americanisation' of Israeli society and politics.[83] But even this orientation does put an emphasis on Israel's difference with regard to its *regional environment.*

In the framework of the Barcelona process, and in presence of senior EU officials, Israel has repeatedly voiced quite dissenting assessments regarding its 'place in the region'. As mentioned above, Israeli Finance Ministry officials have repeatedly stressed that Israel's economic place *is in Europe,* and not in the Mediterranean.[84] Others have suggested that Israel should emphasise more assertively its 'special' standing in the region *vis-à-vis* the EU, and advance sub-regional co-operation with similar countries, namely Turkey, Malta and Cyprus.[85] On the other hand, Foreign Ministry officials have asserted that Israel was always interested in participating in the EMP as *southern Mediterranean country.* This goes hand in hand with officials from Israel's Environment Ministry claiming that "we are all Mediterraneans"[86]. Certainly, there is not

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[78] "Address to the Knesset by Prime Minister Rabin Presenting his Government, 13 July 1992", in Medzini (ed.), 1995, Vol. 13-14: 1992-1994, Document 1, pp. 1-9; quote on p. 2.

[79] "Interview with Ezer Weizman", *Spectrum* (the Israeli Labour Party's monthly journal), No. 6, June 1998, p. 10.

[80] Menchem Friedman: "A People that Dwells Alone" (a review of a book about *Haredi* society and political parties), *Ha'aretz*, Rosh Hashanah (New Year) supplement, 17 September 2001, p. B9.

[81] It is based in the conviction that other people and 'nations' are imminently hostile to the Jewish people, while it views the isolation of the latter as a blessing. See Rubinstein, 1980, pp. 120 ff.

[82] See the interview with *Likud* Party leader and present Prime Minister Sharon in *Ha'aretz Magazine,* 2001, *op. cit.*

[83] This is often based on the perception of a strong cultural affinity between Israel and the US, as for example the current *Likud* party platform stresses. See <www.likud.org.il/da/chutz.asp> (in Hebrew), accessed 14 August 2001.

[84] Dan Catarivas in a seminar on "Israel and the Barcelona Process: Perspectives for the Future", organised by the Israeli Association for the Study of European Integration, 2 December 2000, Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv.

[85] See Delegation of Israel to the European Commission, internal paper on the Barcelona process, 30 May 2000 (in Hebrew), no page numbers.

[86] Ori Livne, Director of International Relations, Ministry of Environment, in her presentation at a conference on "Israel and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Experience to Date", organised by the Delegation of the European

necessarily a contradiction between being a European-type economy and Western-style democracy that is located in the southern Mediterranean/Middle East. But in view of the EMP's aim of promoting common themes and a shared identity, it is relevant whether Israel puts a stronger emphasis on *common features* or *difference*. While the latter has been more pronounced at large, Israel has actually been giving very different signals, somewhat in 'yes-but-no' manner.

In one way or another, many Israeli officials involved in and observers of the Barcelona process have voiced their impression that Israel is somewhat caught between the Middle East and Europe.[87] It certainly reflects Israel's feature of being a mixture between 'Krakow and Casablanca'. Yet this also means that the domestic divide between *Ashkenazi* and *Mizrahi*/Arab cultural themes is relevant here, as it theoretically implies the support for different regional orientations. In terms of cognitive regions, the Mediterranean idea is quite similar to Peres' vision of a 'New Middle East'. The latter, however, did not find much support among his own Labour party, mainly because it was perceived as being too exotic and transgressing by far the boundaries set by Israel's main identity themes.[88] Were it to become an issue of public debate, the Mediterranean vision would probably face comparable difficulties. Needless to say that the already meagre domestic support for a 'New Middle East', or a Euro-Mediterranean region for this matter, further diminishes in situations of renewed conflict and violence between Israel and its 'significant other' – which are part of the region to be constructed.

Thus, Israel's dissenting identity discourse evidences its difficulties in deciding of whether it belongs rather to a 'Western' or 'Middle Eastern' cognitive region, whether it is 'part of the region', or 'different' and detached from it. Although the EMP narrative does not imply a need to choose between 'West' and 'East' – but actually aims at their reconciliation – it strongly tends to emphasise Israel's Mediterranean character and its anchorage in the region. Yet the question of whether Israel's geographic location is relevant for its identity cannot be separated from the question of what kind of state Israel wants to be and how it is to relate to its 'significant other'. Yet independently of the EMP, these questions touch different dimensions of Israel's unsettled identity and have therefore not received a clear answer thus far.

3. Israel's relations to the EU

There is a basic consensus in Israel regarding the type of favoured relations to the EU, which also affects Israel's interpretation of the Mediterranean logic. In fact, Israel was interested in the EU's financial assistance to the peace process as long as the latter was proceeding. But at large, Israel wants the EU to maintain a low *political* profile in the region, while relations should rest on the advanced economic bilateral relations between the two sides. This consensus is strongly related to the Jewish historical experience with 'the Europeans', which has recurrently been nurtured by different political statements of the EC/EU on the Arab-Israeli conflict.[89]

Commission to the State of Israel in co-operation with the Swedish Presidency of the EU, May 16, 2001, Hotel David Intercontinental, Tel Aviv.
[87] On this issue, see also Del Sarto and Tovias, 2001.
[88] See Weissbrod, 1997.
[89] Most notably, this concerns the EC's 1980 Venice Declaration, calling for Palestinian self-determination and the PLO's involvement in future peace negotiations – in times in which the PLO openly advocated Israel's destruction.

The EMP not only seeks to redefine the EU's role in the region, but it also aims at 'normalising' EU-Israeli relations. Indeed, an increased political involvement of the EU in Middle Eastern affairs implies that Israel will accept the EU's support and advice as much as its criticism. Moreover, according to the Euro-Mediterranean regional logic, Israel is no longer a 'special case', but one among several southern Mediterranean countries. However, the 'normalisation' of EU-Israeli relations touches upon one of the most important, and understandably most sensitive, themes of Israel's self-definition, namely recent history and the Holocaust. Indeed, references to this dark chapter of history are frequent in Israel's public discourse towards EU officials and European politicians, while Israel perceives that the EU has a historic responsibility towards 'the Jewish State'.[90] In view of Israel's defining identity themes, many Jewish Israelis perceive that 'Europe' is biased, and can therefore not be trusted when it comes to Israel's security.[91]

Yet in spite of the consensus, Labour-led governments, and particularly former Prime Minister Ehud Barak and his ministers Shlomo Ben-Ami and Shimon Peres, promoted an amicable and value-oriented discourse towards the EU. While consulting frequently with European political leaders, they also pursued a rather 'Europeanist' foreign policy. According to Ben-Ami, the EU's foreign affairs representative Javier Solana "has an important role to play in this part of the world as key member of the European Union leadership."[92] Similarly, Peres expresses "gratitude and appreciation"[93] for the visit of an EU delegation to Israel in March 2001, which occurred in the context of international efforts to end the violence between Israel and the Palestinians. Peres even called the visit "another important page in the book of European-Mediterranean relations".[94] Yet while the Barak government referred to the EU special envoy to the Middle East as "our friend Moratinus *[sic]*"[95], the same 'friend' was repeatedly confronted with accusations that the EU's positions are unbalanced and a "distortion of justice"[96] under the Netanyahu government. Similarly, regarding the EU's 1999 statement on Jerusalem as *corpus separatum,* Netanyahu's government responded that "it is particularly regrettable that Europe, where one third of the Jewish people perished, has seen fit to try and impose a solution which endangers the state of Israel and runs counter to its interests."[97]

Only few among the political élite of Israel's political 'Centre-Left' – such as the Labourites Peres, Ben-Ami, and Yossi Beilin – apparently considered the idea of 'normalising' EU-Israeli

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[90] See various official statements of Israeli governments regarding the EU or single European states in Medzini (ed.), several volumes. For the role of history in EC/EU-Israeli relations, see also Sachar, 1999.

[91] See for example Alpher, 1998; and Barry Rubin: "Is It Any Wonder Israel is Loath to Bring the Europeans into the Peace Process?, *The Jerusalem Post,* 20 March 2001, p. 9. Most Jewish Israelis assumedly share this position.

[92] "Statement by Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami and Javier Solana, EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Following their Meeting, December 11, 2000", at <www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/asp?MFAH07h7e0>, accessed 3 June 2001.

[93] "Statement Following a Meeting of Foreign Minister Peres with President-in-office of the EU, Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh and EU Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten, Jerusalem, 13 March 2001", at <www. mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAHjq40>, accessed 3 June 2001. The visit occurred in the context of the efforts of the Mitchell Commission to draw recommendations in order to end the violence in the Middle East.

[94] *Ibid.*

[95] "Statement by Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami and Javier Solana…", *op. cit.* (Footnote 92)

[96] "Summary of a Meeting between Foreign Minister Sharon and EU Envoy Moratinos, 29 January 1999", at <www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0h6j0>, accessed 3 June 2001. This refers to EU's 1999 statement that held Israel responsible for not implementing the Wye River Memorandum according to the agreed schedule.

[97] "Reaction by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Sharon on the EU Statement on Jerusalem….", *op. cit.* (Footnote 18). As mentioned above, terming Jerusalem *corpus separatum* defies Israeli sovereignty over the city.

relations. These 'Europeanists' certainly assent to the central role of the Holocaust for Jewish collective memory, but seem to draw slightly different conclusions regarding the question of how this is to affect present and future EU-Israeli relations. At large, Israel's altering government coalitions have given different signals regarding the EU's role in the region. They have invited the EU to play a greater role in the region, and recurrently rebuffed the EU's efforts to do so with partly harsh accusations. However, in the long run, adopting a Mediterranean identity and engaging in the EMP implies a need to choose between competing concepts of state identity, as the 'normalisation' of EU-Israeli relations necessitates the development towards becoming a 'normal' country. In general terms, the latter already faces an important domestic opposition, as discussed above. Yet by touching upon a central and sensitive theme of Israel's self-definition, the EMP's attempts to 'normalise' EU-Israeli relations, and thus, Israel's 'self', assumedly face an even larger reluctance at the domestic level.

4. The Mediterranean theme and Israel's quest for unity

The extremely few references to the Mediterranean theme in Israel's official discourse mainly occurred in the context of official EMP events – and they were mostly pronounced by Shimon Peres. Before the start of the Barcelona process, Israel did not seriously consider the option of being part of the Mediterranean. Even after the beginning of the EMP, discussions on the 'Mediterranean option' remained confined to a relatively small group of Israeli academics, politicians, and intellectuals. Thus far, the subject has remained exotic indeed.

Against the backdrop of Israel's contested identity, some Israeli scholars view the potential of an overarching Mediterranean identity theme as "a common cultural platform for the discussion of tensions on separate identities"[98] within Israeli society. Theoretically, the inclusive nature of the Mediterranean theme may soothe the friction inherent in different interpretations of Israeli identity indeed, while reconciling Israel with its neighbours and geographic location.[99] In this context, some have emphasised the importance of the Mediterranean in the Jewish past, and stressed that the early Zionists, who came from the sea, primarily settled the coast.[100] The few supporters of a Mediterranean option also tend to argue that Israel's integration into the Middle East is not a viable option at present.[101] They emphasise that such a perspective raises suspicions both among Arab countries and Israel, which are linked to fears of Israel's economic domination for the former, and fears of cultural assimilation into Arab culture for the latter. But the Mediterranean idea certainly implies a departure from the dream of Israel's founding generation, the "socialist world reformers, the fathers of the kibbutz"[102], as the novelist Amos Oz pointed out.

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[98] David Ohana: "Israel Towards a Mediterranean Identity", in Avineri and Weidenfeld (eds.), 1999, pp. 81-99, quote on p. 86.

[99] As pointed out elsewhere, for Israel, a Mediterranean regional identity could overarch a large array of sub-identities (Israeli, Jewish, Arab, *Ashkenazi, Mizrahi,* Muslim, Christian). Similarly, being Mediterranean is compatible with a religious as well as with a secular-ethnic interpretation of 'Jewishness', while it does not contradict Islamic, Christian and/or Arab culture. See Del Sarto and Tovias, 2001.

[100] Irad Malkin in a conference on "The Mediterranean Idea", organised by the Center for Mediterranean Civilisations Project at Tel Aviv University and Mishkenot Sha'ananim, Jerusalem, 27-31 January 2001.

[101] See Ohana in Avineri and Weidenfeld (eds.), 1999, *op. cit.*

[102] Oz, 1998, p. 28 (in Hebrew).

For a large majority, however, the Mediterranean theme is pure romanticism.[103] Some view the Mediterranean idea as euphemistic version of 'Middle Easternism', which they refute. Others suggest that the Mediterranean idea was relevant in the past, when the Mediterranean Sea was central to trade routes. But in the era of planes and e-commerce, geographic realities are no longer relevant. A quite common argument is that the Mediterranean image of the lemon tree no longer applies to Israel, where High-Tech has become much more important in economic terms than lemons. Hence, according to this argument, the Mediterranean idea will hardly succeed in serving as integrating theme for Israel, let alone for the region.

Thus, Israel's incapacity of developing a strategy towards the Mediterranean is well reflected in the absence of a Mediterranean vision among the majority of Israel's political and academic élite. This is not to say that the Mediterranean theme lacks any integrative force. But as long as Israel's élite does not promote it consciously, its relevance is limited indeed. Yet particularly since the assassination of Itzhak Rabin, many political leaders have advocated internal 'unity'. The real dilemma is, however, that there is a clear absence of unifying identity themes that appeal to all Israeli citizens.[104] The smallest common denominator for a majority of Israelis seems to be the concept of 'Jewishness'. But besides harbouring insurmountable contradictions, this concept, by definition, also leaves Israel's Arab citizens out. Former Prime Minister Netanyahu's calls for 'unity', for instance, invoked the "Jewish heritage, which is the basis of our unity *as a people*, and from which we draw the principles of justice and equality for all of Israel's citizens, Jewish and non-Jewish alike."[105] The subtext clearly refers to the unity of the *Jewish people*. Netanyahu's statement thus rather resembles an attempt to square the circle. In fact, lacking other integrative symbols, Israel's quest for 'unity' entails an emphasis on the particularistic and communal element of Israeli identity. With it, there does not seem to be much room for the promotion of regional and inclusive identity themes of whatever type.

IV. The second *Intifada*, September 11, and the Mediterranean

Competing concepts of Israeli identity call for different foreign policy behaviour. For this reason, postponing any crucial decision may temporarily soothe the domestic divisions. With the collapse of the peace process, the option of a "New Middle East", of territorial compromise in exchange for peace, and the idea of becoming a 'nation like all nations' seem to appertain to quite a different time and place. It has been argued that the quest for unity provides a cliché, since the closing of societal cleavages generally occurs only amidst situations of external threat.[106] And indeed, in the current situation of external threat since the outbreak of the second *Intifada*, Israel's internal 'identity debates' have receded considerably, and there seems to be more 'unity' – at least

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[103] See, for example, Meron Benvenisti: "Erroneous Mediterranean Port", *Ha'aretz*, 21 March 1996 (in Hebrew). This was also the prevailing opinion during a Round Table Discussion on "Israel and the Mediterranean" in the framework of an international conference on "The Mediterranean Idea", organised by the Center for Mediterranean Civilisations Project at Tel Aviv University and Mishkenot Sha'ananim, Jerusalem, 27-31 January 2001.

[104] Kimmerling has pointed out that all of Israel's official holidays and memorial days refer to Jewish religion and history, while the only 'Israeli' civic day of festivity – namely Independence Day – "is a bitter reminder of Palestinian Arabs of their political and social devastation". Kimmerling, 1993, p. 415.

[105] "Address by Prime Minister-elect Netanyahu to *Likud* meeting, 2 June 1996", at <www.mfa/gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0ej50>; accessed 18 September 2001; my italics.

[106] See Newman, 1997.

among Israel's Jewish population. But this development implies the accentuation of the religious-ethnic interpretation of Israeli identity, in which 'Israeli' and 'Jewish' are tantamount. This development goes also hand in hand with an increased sense of insecurity, international isolation, and an emphasis on *difference* with regard to other peoples and 'nations'.

Long before the events of September 11, Israel was directly affected by terror attacks. Indeed, suicide bombings perpetrated by Palestinians against Israeli civilians have been accompanying the second *Intifada* – and actually the whole period of the peace process. As much as recurrent terror attacks have been held responsible for the election of Binyamin Netanyahu in 1996[107], they also explain the election of Ariel Sharon following the outbreak of the second *Intifada*, after which the number of terror attacks inside the Green Line increased considerably. For most Israelis, suicide bombers killed the peace process in the final analysis. In view of Israel's defining identity themes – most notably the Holocaust, the need for a Jewish state, and the principle of self-reliance – Israel tends to perceive these attacks as existential threats. Its core identity themes, which had nurtured a basically 'realist' foreign policy, also explain why Israel views its current policy against the Palestinians as necessary and legitimate self-defence against the terror of the *Intifada*, irrespective of what the international community may think. From an Israeli perspective, September 11 confirmed this perception. In its official discourse, Israel's perception of its conflict with the Palestinians has witnessed an almost exclusive interpretation in terms of Israel's 'war against terrorism' since then.[108] This is not to say that the interpretation of reality of the current Israeli government does not follow strategic reasons as well. However, the fact that Sharon is leading a grand coalition whose policy towards the Palestinians enjoys a large support among the Israeli public – as recurrent polls have shown – evidences that for a majority of Israelis, these identity-based perceptions are 'real'. In addition, September 11 undoubtedly strengthened Israel's identification with the US, while prompting Israel's unconditional positioning on the side of the 'free world' versus 'terrorism'.

Yet this development has also reinforced Israel's *difference* to its Euro-Mediterranean neighbourhood. The Palestinians view the *Intifada* as legitimate means to fight Israeli occupation and to struggle for national liberation, while a suicide bomber is termed *shahid* – a martyr for the cause. Similarly, other Arab neighbours do not follow Israel's identity-based interpretation of reality, and neither does the European Union, which defines itself in terms of 'civilian power'. Indeed, the EU's promotion of democracy, human rights, and 'post-nationalist' liberalism on the international stage, along with its reluctance (and inability) to exert influence by military means in world politics, finally represent the core themes of how the EU *defines itself*.[109] In view of the EU-Israeli identity dissonance, the EU's criticism of Israel's current policy against the Palestinians is as self-evident as Israel's prevailing perception that, in times of terror, the EU's

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[107] See for example Ehud Sprinzak: "The Shaping of the Israeli Right and Its Current Attitudes", in Dowty et al. (eds.), 1997, pp. 35-39.

[108] The references to terrorism in Israel's official discourse are too numerous to mention. One Israeli journalist has ironically noticed that "since September 11, […] every form of combat and military operation [of the Israeli army] has been upgraded to a 'war against terrorism'. […] It is not surprising that the chief of staff and his cabinet ministers make sure to stick the word 'terrorism' into every sentence three times […] which just goes to show that when everything is terrorism, anything goes." Doron Rosenblum: "The Philosophy and Thematics of Janana", *Ha'aretz Magazine*, English edition, January 24, 2002, p. 5.

[109] Among the extensive literature on this issue, see for example Weaver 1996, Wintle (ed.), 1996; Christiansen at al. (1999); Merlingen, Mudde and Sedelmeier, 2001.

emphasis on human rights and international law are partly out of touch with reality. At the same time, Israel's dismissal of European criticism as anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic bias reflects and reinforces its history-rooted perceptions of 'us' and 'them'. With it, Euro-Mediterranean region-building and the promotion of a shared identity, seem more unattainable than ever.

V. Conclusions

The recent collapse of the peace process and the outbreak of violence in the Middle East overshadow any alternative explanation of the difficulties of Euro-Mediterranean region-building. Yet an identity-based analysis permits for an explanation that links Israel's lack of strategy towards the Mediterranean to questions of identity and domestic constraints.

Israel's dominating identity themes imply a strong tendency to *underline difference*. The Zionist rationale of the 'Jewish State', the Holocaust, the theme of 'Jewishness' combining religion, ethnicity and nation, and the principle of self-reliance are consistent with the underlying principles of Jewish religion, which promotes the concept of the 'chosen people', is exclusive and does not proselyte.[110] Although all states and 'nations' are characterised by an in-group/our-group bias, Israel's identity themes still remain a somewhat negative precondition for region-building ventures at large. Adopting a Mediterranean identity in the sense of the EMP implies a redefinition of its 'significant other', a reconsideration of its 'place in the region', a different definition of the concept of security, along with the reshaping of its relations to the EU. This necessitates a departure from Israel's prevailing perception of having 'no choice' in its regional relations, the principle of 'trust no one', and the sense of regional detachment and international isolation. Thus, for Israel, engaging in Euro-Mediterranean region-building demands a *fundamental change* of how it defines itself.

As the beginning of Oslo showed, a new and peaceful regional order implies a *need to choose* between contradicting concepts of Israel's identity. The beginning of the peace process went hand in hand with the attempt of the Rabin government to alter Israel's self-perception, and thus, its behaviour. Yet large domestic groups resist any attempts to change Israel's identity. In view of its multidimensional identity polarisation and fragile parliamentary balance, policy choices that involve one or several aspects of Israel's contested identity have produced policy oscillation or, alternatively, stalemate. With it, Israel's identity discourse has remained dissonant. The EMP's 'Mediterranean region' goes even further than Peres' vision of a 'New Middle East', as it also concerns Israel's relations with the Europeans, while it is based on a more 'exotic' geographic dimension, i.e. the Mediterranean. The different elements of the EMP's attempted identity manipulation all touch central identity themes, whose interpretation is contested at the domestic level, and which have therefore remained unsettled in the first place. Thus, as long as the question of what the state of Israel wants to be is not sorted out, Israel will be quite incapable of adopting a Mediterranean identity and engaging consistently in region-building.

In fact, Israel is facing a serious dilemma, as the beginning of the peace process, and its breakdown, has shown. The option of moving towards a different regional order exacerbates Israel's domestic identity conflicts, which, in turn, put a strain on engaging consistently in Euro-

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[110] I owe this observation to Sharon Lev.

Mediterranean region-building. On the other hand, postponing crucial policy decisions increases societal cohesion, at least among Israel's Jewish majority, yet without solving Israel's crucial identity questions. External threats and terror attacks additionally cause a temporary soothing of the internal fragmentation. But this development inevitably leads to a stronger emphasis on 'Jewishness' as main integrating theme, reinforces Israel's particularistic self-definition, and accentuates Israel's cognitive boundaries between 'the Jewish State' and 'the other'. The events of September 11 have reinforced Israel's identity-based perception of difference with regard to most of its 'Mediterranean neighbours', Arab states and the EU alike. At the same time, September 11 has further generated the drifting apart of identity-based perceptions of reality across the Euro-Mediterranean.

In view of the discussion, three lessons may be drawn for the future of Euro-Mediterranean region-building. First, domestic factors deserve a special attention. They may not only dictate the pace of region-building, but also determine the chances of whether specific regional identity themes may work or not. Second, region-building necessitates conscious and cautious *identity politics* at the domestic level, along with a commitment of domestic actors. It is certainly not sufficient if an external actor, such as the EU in the case of the EMP, remains the only promoter of a Mediterranean narrative. At the same time, cautious identity manipulations necessitate time. Finally, the actors involved in Euro-Mediterranean region-building must take into account that identities influence the perception of reality, and that, consequently, different interpretations of the latter are possible. If region-building in the Mediterranean is to succeed in the long term, a better understanding of the self-definition of the respective 'other', along with its consequences for the perception of reality, is imperative.

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