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# One Year after October 7: Reflections on Shrinking Spaces and Personal Realities

This essay offers a reflection on the year following the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel – a period that has unprecedently shaped my personal and professional engagement with the global landscape of Jewish and Israel Studies. The topics addressed in this work, while appearing disparate at first glance, are interconnected and often even entangled through their shared emergence within these evolving fields. Over the past year, these themes have appeared with more pronounced clarity, revealing dynamics that had long remained beneath the surface, now defined by heightened intensity and significance.

On October 6, we attended Simchat Torah at the Beit Daniel synagogue in northern Tel Aviv. The Reform community offers a space for those who don't necessarily fit within the stricter Orthodox framework of Judaism in Israel. The celebration was vibrant, with dancing and joy, including Rabba Galia, a leading figure, carrying the Torah. Later that evening, we headed to my mother-in-law's apartment in Ramat Gan to spend the night before a scheduled work trip to the south. I was preparing for the European Association of Israel Studies (EAIS) annual conference from October 8–10, which our board was organizing in collaboration with our colleagues at Ben-Gurion University. We planned to leave early, pick up my doctoral student from her hostel in Neve Tzedek, and head to Beer Sheva. This was intended to be the first EAIS conference held in Israel after a decade in Europe.

Before 7 am, the alarm sounded, and my mother-in-law cried out, "Milchama, milchama" (a war), still half-dreaming. We reassured her, assuming it was likely just one missile, and that we should try to go back to sleep. But when another alarm went off ten minutes later, we turned on the TV. Over the past year, I have

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often thought about that morning when everything still seemed innocent. My husband and I even exchanged smiles, thinking his mother was overreacting.

As we watched the news, reports began to surface about people from the Gaza envelope communities and kibbutzim pleading for rescue, live on air, many hours after the attack erupted. There were immediate suspicions of kidnappings into Gaza, and the first confirmed number we heard was 35 abducted, eventually rising to 251 people. It was difficult to comprehend what was unfolding, and the situation only became clearer over the following days and weeks. Shortly after, we were offered evacuation spots on a flight to Prague – my Israeli husband, despite not having Czech residency, was quickly added to the list. However, we decided to stay until our original departure date.

In the ensuing days, with friends from the EAIS, we helped arrange the evacuation of some European students and colleagues who had been planning to attend the conference that had now been canceled. Some were deeply shaken, as we were, although it took time to fully understand the extent of our shock. We attempted to donate blood at Ichilov Hospital, but the sheer number of volunteers meant we were turned away. We felt utterly helpless. Meanwhile, terrorists remained hidden in the country, and missiles continued coming in dozens.[1] One of my sisters-in-law left for Cyprus with her two daughters, who couldn't sleep through the nights in their Tel Aviv apartment. My other sister-in-law, with two children under three and another on the way, had no choice but to stay. Their building, too old to have a Mamad (shelter), left them especially vulnerable.

We eventually made it to Prague, fortunate to have booked flights with El Al, as many airlines had already halted operations. My husband, usually the healthiest of us, suddenly developed a high fever and was bedridden for more than a week. As I prepared to begin teaching my course on Israeli society, I was given an unexpected respite – a student-led environmental strike canceled the first week of classes, giving me time to recuperate. I ran into a former student, a refugee from Ukraine, who asked how I was doing. I struggled to respond.

When the time came to give my first lecture, I wondered what I should say. In the end, I spoke non-stop for ninety minutes, recounting everything. After the class, I found myself questioning whether I had shared too much. Shortly afterward, Czech state TV contacted me, asking for live commentary on the situation. They wanted to know when the IDF would enter Gaza and whether Hamas could

**1** Between October 7 and October 31, 2023, Hamas launched 8,500 rockets and mortar shells at Israel. See https://acleddata.com/2023/11/08/regional-overview-middle-east-october-2023-the-regional-implications-of-the-israel-gaza-conflict/.

be defeated. I wished I had the answers. Over the following weeks, I continued appearing on television, but the exhaustion began to set in.

Meanwhile, protests erupted on university campuses across the Western world, escalating tensions. Our research on Jewish-Muslim relations in Europe[2] was postponed indefinitely, as events quickly spiraled out of control. The Czech context, though more restrained compared to elsewhere, was not immune to the discourse. On social media, a strange debate emerged: Should analysts and commentators of Jewish background disclose their identity when discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? This conversation, driven largely by educated, left-leaning liberals, felt surreal. I eventually withdrew from TV appearances, preoccupied with preparations for a major conference. I also decided not to teach during the summer term – a decision that, I admit, felt like a relief.

On December 21, I received an email from the university's bursary office informing us of an active shooting at our faculty building. We were instructed to barricade ourselves. While I wasn't in the building at the time, hundreds of students, faculty, and staff were. Fourteen people were killed and twenty-five injured.[3] Over the following hours, I received messages from friends and colleagues worldwide. Unsurprisingly, the Jewish ones were the most concerned, their first thoughts drifting toward history and wondering whether this was the beginning of something darker.

The university's response was swift and comprehensive. Psychological support for students and staff was organized with impressive efficiency, and all faculty were required to undergo post-trauma intervention before meeting with students after the Christmas break. It wasn't until then that I realized this was exactly what I had needed after October 7.

Right after Christmas, I hosted a live online interview with Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, a renowned Israeli expert on women's rights who had profoundly influenced my dissertation years ago. I had considered canceling the interview due to the circumstances but ultimately decided to proceed. We discussed the sexual violence committed on October 7 and the long-lasting non-response from the international community and feminist organizations. A social media meme echoed in my mind: "Me too, unless you are a Jew". As an introduction, I quoted an investigative *New York Times* article on the subject in an attempt to offer a balanced per-

**2** Marcela Menachem Zoufalá et al., "Introduction: Urban coexistence: Perspectives on Jews and Muslims in the social fabric of Europe", in "Jewish and Muslim Communities in European Urban Spaces: A Comparative Approach", a special Issue of *Ethnicities*, published online November 26, 2024.

**3** "Czechia: Shock as 14 Die in University Shooting", *Radio Prague International*, accessed via https://english.radio.cz/czechia-shock-14-die-university-shooting-8803761.

spective from a widely trusted source.[4] The session, part of an open online forum we had established post-October 7 for members of the EAIS, aimed to counter the isolation felt by colleagues at Israeli institutions. The subject matter was deeply disturbing, but we believed it was crucial to raise awareness.

## Did Israel "Become Jewish" in Diasporic Terms?

October 7 ushered a long-negated diasporic experience into the Israeli context of the 21st century. Consequently, the boundaries between Israeli and diasporic Jewish self-perceptions have blurred, leading to a convergence of identities. A sense of belonging and ownership – often elusive in diaspora communities – has flourished in Israel, establishing a stable locus of identity not only for Israelis but also for Jews worldwide, including those who have never visited the country or previously expressed any attachment to it.

The post-October 7 development epitomizes a novel reality, marked by the merging of diasporic and Israeli imaginaries alongside a loss of ontological security. In this light, October 7 can be interpreted as a moment when previously latent, "subversive" diasporic undercurrents penetrated Israeli consciousness – once again challenging Israel's ability to integrate and contain these influences.

**4** Alissa J. Rubin and Adam Sella, "Screams Without Words: How Hamas Weaponized Sexual Violence on Oct. 7", *The New York Times*, December 28, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/28/world/middleeast/oct-7-attacks-hamas-israel-sexual-violence.html: "Israeli officials say that everywhere Hamas terrorists struck – the rave, the military bases along the Gaza border and the kibbutzim – they brutalized women. A two-month investigation by The Times uncovered painful new details, establishing that the attacks against women were not isolated events but part of a pattern of gender-based violence on Oct. 7. Relying on video footage, photographs, GPS data from mobile phones and interviews with more than 150 people, including witnesses, medical personnel, soldiers and rape counselors, The Times identified at least seven locations where Israeli women and girls appear to have been sexually assaulted or mutilated. Many of the accounts are difficult to bear, and the visual evidence is disturbing to see. The Times viewed photographs of one woman's corpse that emergency responders discovered in the rubble of a besieged kibbutz with dozens of nails driven into her thighs and groin. The Times also viewed a video, provided by the Israeli military, showing two dead Israeli soldiers at a base near Gaza who appeared to have been shot directly in their vaginas".

## Battle of Narratives: "This Expression must be *Eliminated*"

Since the beginning of the new semester, I have sought to reflect on recent events in a manuscript submitted to a prestigious peer-reviewed European journal. One of the key paragraphs reads as follows: "The attack perpetrated by Hamas on Israel reignited Holocaust trauma for Jews, both within Israel and globally. The immediate onset of a sense of peril and insecurity, coupled with subsequent feelings of abandonment and isolation, has permeated both Israel and its diasporic communities. The Jewish diaspora finds itself arguably more psychologically connected to Israel than ever before. The traditionally delicate and meticulously defined boundaries between Israel and its diasporas have become less distinct. Jews are now also perceived interchangeably with Israelis, resulting in a natural association of accountability for the actions and policies of the State of Israel. This phenomenon echoes the well-documented historical reality of Jews in Central-Eastern Europe under communist regimes[5] now resurfacing with global significance".

When the journal sent back the responses, an anonymous reviewer's reaction left me stunned. The paragraph I quoted above met with strong resistance. They wrote:

> It seems to me that it concedes too much/tends to align too much with the racist ideological narrative of Israel. In reality, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, Jewish communities strongly distance themselves from Israel and its policies and do not identify with the Zionist state. We too, as scholars and social scientists, must not make two very different realities such as Jewish belonging and the state of Israel coincide. Furthermore, what does it mean "Israel and its diasporas"!? Diaspora from where!? The population of Israel immigrated to Israel from other countries, almost always "Western" countries, more often from Europe/Eastern Europe, not the other way around. That is, there is no "Israeli diaspora". This expression must be eliminated and changed from the entire text [. . .] as it is socio-historically incorrect.[6]

The overwhelmingly emotional response, which notably overlooked nearly half of Israel's population with Middle Eastern or North African roots, surprisingly passed through the editorial board of this esteemed journal. I believed I was merely articulating what seemed obvious, reflecting both my own observations

**5** Joanna Dyduch, Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, and Olaf Glöckner, "Israel Studies in Poland, Czech Republic, and Germany: Paths of Development, Dynamics, and Directions of Changes". *Journal of Israeli History* 41 (2): 241–83.

**6** Blind peer-review comments on an anonymized submitted article.

and the sentiments openly shared within my global social circles.[7] Many felt a sense of ambiguity, deep frustration, and anger toward the Israeli government, yet they remained connected to Israel as a country and its society.

The reviewer, however, correctly identified the growing phenomenon of distancing, which has been intensifying over time, particularly – but not exclusively – in the United States. Similar trends can be observed in Czechia, especially through the activities of groups loosely affiliated with the Jewish Voice for Solidarity (JVS).[8] In June, an anonymous group launched the so-called Declaration of Independence of the Diaspora,[9] whose content echoes John Lennon's song *Imagine*. The Declaration advocates for the dissolution of nation-states, including Israel. While radical, this call is far from being novel, either globally or for this specific group.

The polarization within the global Jewish community is undeniably pronounced, and differing reactions to the events of October 7 have further deepened this divide. However, for many, this internal division is seen as an intrinsic aspect of Jewish identity. Despite these cleavages, the State of Israel remains a centre of gravity for both its supporters and its critics, regardless of their ethno-religious backgrounds. Israel is often fetishized, with a burning need for individuals and groups to position themselves in relation to it. In this sense, Israel serves as a vital backdrop, providing a space for both alignment and opposition. It acts as a catalyst for the formation and evolution of identities, whether in positive or negative terms.

One of the findings of my research on changing Jewish self-perception in Central Europe was showing how the rise in xenophobia and Islamophobia during the so-called refugee crisis led Czech Jews to identify with Muslims, heightening their own awareness of being a minority. In some instances, this deepened the divide between them and broader society, further reinforcing their Jewish identity.[10]

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**7** Cf. Anna Štičková, "Být Židovkou a Queer po 7. Říjnu". *Revue Prostor* (2024), accessed February 6, 2025, https://revueprostor.cz/zidovka-queer-7-rijen.

**8** Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, "Ethno-religious Othering as a Reason Behind the Central European Jewish Distancing from Israel", in *Being Jewish in 21st Century Central Europe*, ed. Haim Fireberg, Olaf Glöckner, and Marcela Menachem Zoufalá (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), p. 189.

**9** See Declaration of Independence of Diaspora (2024): https://vimeo.com/976299705?fbclid=IwY2xjawF4jqtleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHfCOCos3OmAJ23n7gETLsoaW1pgm7umo9y9kTbr9dz4u6APa9_CgxRAr9Q_aem_MyOjilSZ0NSvOu9pkazM8w.

**10** Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, "Ambivalence, Dilemmas, and Aporias of Contemporary Czech Jewish Lived Experience", in *United in Diversity: Contemporary European Jewry in an Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Marcela Menachem Zoufalá and Olaf Glöckner (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), pp. 161–80.

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) report, published at the end of September 2024, highlights the emergence of new "xenophobic, anti-Muslim narratives and attitudes across the EU" as a consequence of the war in Gaza. The report states that many European Muslims now feel "physically threatened" as well as "marginalized, alienated, and out of place".[11] These sentiments may be triggered, among other factors, by the widespread expressions of support and solidarity with Israel from European governments following the events of October 7. Muslims who identify predominantly with Palestinians may perceive that European concern for the victims in Gaza is overshadowed by greater empathy for Jewish victims, further intensifying their sense of exclusion.

As mentioned above, in the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis, many Jews identified with Muslim minorities, reporting an increasing sense of estrangement from the majority population. During the war in Gaza, European Muslims similarly experienced a shift in their self-perception, which became increasingly shaped by the Palestinian cause. These evolving projections and affiliations have profound implications, with the potential to influence not only the trajectories of the Jewish and Muslim communities but also broader European societal dynamics.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to resonate globally, influencing the interactions between Jews and Muslims as if the "lachrymose narrative"[12] has materialized in the aftermath of those October events, shaping their relationships on a more profound level. Besides the mentioned triggering of intergenerational Holocaust trauma, the Arab world has experienced a shared sense of mourning and outrage in response to the devastating images emerging from the Gaza Strip and a deepening humanitarian crisis. The perceived helplessness of distant, predominantly virtual observers closely monitoring the unfolding events in the Middle East via online platforms has served as a driving force for widespread global demonstrations and protests.

**11** European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), "Welcome to Barbieland: European Sentiment in the Year of Wars and Elections" (2024), https://ecfr.eu/publication/welcome-to-barbieland-european-sentiment-in-the-year-of-wars-and-elections/#beyond-white-europe.

**12** Ben Gidley and Samuel Sami Everett, "Introduction: Jews and Muslims in Europe. Between Discourse and Experience", in *Jews and Muslims in Europe: Between Discourse and Experience*, ed. Ben Gidley and Samuel Sami Everett (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 1–21 (at p. 5).

## Parallel Silencing of Muslims and Jews

In the aftermath of the described events, two parallel silencing[13] trends emerged for both Muslim and Jewish communities. Jews, as mentioned above, are increasingly perceived as synonymous with Israelis, creating an automatic link between Jewish identity and responsibility for the actions and policies of the Israeli state. The requirement for sustained acknowledgment of the situation in Gaza has become imperative, especially for those seeking to publicly commemorate the events of October 7.

Muslims, in parallel, whether organized groups or individuals, have been frequently pressured to publicly condemn the October 7 massacre. In certain countries, failure to do so led to threats of institutional or financial repercussions or media campaigns targeting those who either refrained from condemning the Hamas attack or did not do so with sufficient vigor.

For both Jewish and Muslim minorities, the situation is not unprecedented; what distinguishes the current moment is the degree of urgency and visibility. Muslims encountered comparable experiences of scrutiny and collective blame following events like 9/11, which aggravated anti-Muslim hatred globally. Similarly, Jewish communities throughout the 20th century have often faced the reality that, regardless of their individual relationship to Jewishness or, more recently, the State of Israel, they would be reminded of their origin. This persistent, predominantly negative outer categorization underscores the shared lived experiences of minority communities that navigate circumstances of suspicion, stereotypization, and politicization on a daily basis.

## Between Ostracization and Instrumentalization

Both communities have been subject to long-term politicization and instrumentalization. For instance, Jews have often been co-opted as a symbolic endorsement, or "kosher stamp", by right-wing political groups and figures such as Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán.[14] Often, we encounter the tendency that is represented by

**13** Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, "Parallel or Entangled Silencing? Jewish and Muslim Experiences Post-October 7", *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 77 (2025): 187–208.

**14** Ivan Kalmar, "Islamophobia and Anti-Antisemitism: The Case of Hungary and the 'Soros Plot'", *Patterns of Prejudice* 54/1–2 (2020): 182–98 (at p. 185).

exploitative reference to "Judeo-Christian values" casting Muslims as adversaries of Jews in order to stigmatize them.[15]

Similarly, in recent years, the concept of liberal Islam in Europe has also frequently found itself embraced by right-wing circles, a phenomenon that has the potential to undermine these initiatives in the eyes of mainstream populations. Needless to emphasize that representatives of liberal Islam often live under constant threat to their lives, additionally facing accusations of conspiratorial collaboration with the United States and Israel. They are seen as "bad" Muslims not only by the more conservative (or radical) Islamic circles but also by progressive non-affiliated bubbles that would be, under different circumstances, their natural partners.

One of the liberal Islam representatives is Ahmad Mansour, an Israeli-German psychologist, and publicist of Arab-Palestinian origin, renowned for his work against radicalization, combating "honor"-related crimes and discrimination, and addressing antisemitism within the Islamic community, who articulated this complex dynamic in a text published in October 2023:

> Personally, I experience antisemitism at work, in schools, in asylum facilities, and in prisons. This hatred is not acting silently; it is no longer covert; it has become self-confident, clear, and visible. Due to my public statements on Israel and my work in combatting antisemitism, I regularly receive threats, encounter defamation, and was even spat on in the streets of Berlin, at the heart of Germany. Allegedly, I am a Zionist, a traitor, and a Mossad agent; a right-wing extremist, and an Uncle Tom Arab who wants to find favour with the Germans and the Jews. Attacks certainly come not just from Palestinians, but primarily from supporters of the extreme left spectrum.[16]

Eminent for establishing the progressive Ibn-Rushd-Goethe Mosque in Berlin, Seyran Ateş, a lawyer and human rights activist, publicly condemned the Hamas attack on Israel via her social media channels. Ateş and her team have been subjected to continual police protection since the mosque's establishment in 2017. During our February research workshop,[17] Imam Ateş attributed direct threats against her and her initiatives exclusively to radical Islamist circles. The mosque, allowing inclusive prayers for both men and women, fostering an LGBTQ+-friendly environment, and prohibiting face-covering veils like the burqa and

**15** Anya Topolski, "The Dangerous Discourse of the 'Judaeo-Christian' Myth: Masking the Race-Religion Constellation in Europe", *Patterns of Prejudice* 54/1–2 (2020): 71–90 (at p. 71).

**16** Ahmad Mansour, "Germany's Cancel Culture and Limitations of Debate", *European Review* 31/5 (2023): 489–97.

**17** Research workshop in Berlin: https://www.mmz-potsdam.de/aktuelles/veranstaltungen/2024/jews-muslims-and-roma-in-the-21st-century-metropolises.

niqab within its premises, prompted the Egyptian Fatwa Council at Al-Azhar University to issue a fatwa against the mosque.[18]

The parallel testimonies of Ateş and Mansour offer critical insights into the complex challenges faced by promoters of liberal Islam. Their efforts are frequently politicized, reflecting the wider dynamics of power and representation. Moreover, the negative experiences of individuals within a minority group that is itself defined as a minority – potentially labelled as "intra-Muslim bigotry" or similarly as "intra-Muslim racism"[19] – can be meaningfully analyzed through an intersectional lens. This approach transcends the conventional, binary framing of Muslim-Jewish conflict, revealing deeper layers of marginalization and agency within the broader socio-political landscape.

## *Anticipating Harms*: Academic Freedom vs. Vulnerable Minorities

During a workshop in Heidelberg hosted by project ENCOUNTERS[20] on Jewish-Muslim relations in Europe, an intriguing discussion emerged regarding the scholarly treatment of Muslim antisemitism in European contexts. One participant highlighted polemics within academic circles about whether Muslim antisemitism should even be considered a relevant research topic. These debates are often situated within the framework of ethical considerations, such as those outlined in the 2021 *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice* by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK (ASA). The guidelines state:

> In certain political contexts, some groups, for example, religious or ethnic minorities, may be particularly vulnerable and it may be necessary to withhold data from publication, archiving, or even to refrain from working with them at all.[21]

Several examples of such challenges were discussed. One participant recounted their experiences in US academia, describing how any critical examination of

**18** "Berlin's Liberal Mosque: Egyptian Fatwa Against German Mosque That Allows Women and Men to Pray Together", *The Guardian*, June 25, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/25/ibn-rushd-goethe-mosque-berlin-seyran-ates-egypt-fatwa-burqa-niqab.

**19** Intra-Muslim Racism: https://ing.org/intra-muslim-racism/.

**20** Project ENCOUNTERS: https://www.mmg.mpg.de/640536/encounters-ora-joint-research-project.

**21** Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK (ASA), "Ethical Guidelines 2021 for Good Research Practice" (2021), https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ethics/asa_ethicsgl_2021.pdf.

Muslim antisemitism, even from a strictly historical perspective, was often perceived as controversial and barely acceptable, even if it did not touch on contemporary issues.

This brought to mind a similar account shared by a colleague, a seasoned scholar specializing in European antisemitism. The scholar had submitted a paper presenting research that compared levels of antisemitism between two distinct groups of European Muslim immigrants with shared territorial and religious backgrounds. The peer-reviewer labeled the work "covertly Islamophobic" and "Arabophobic", accusing the scholar of "cherry-picking" data.

After reading the article, my assessment was quite the opposite. The study employed a large sample of combined qualitative and quantitative data, that convincingly showed that each group in focus has divergent attitudes toward Jews, ranging from positive to negative. The study illustrated the diverse opinions among immigrants, portraying them as individuals with a plurality of voices. By highlighting these differences, the research dismantled the monolithic perception of Muslims as a homogenous group, a stereotype that often underpins anti-Muslim prejudice. Furthermore, the paper criticized the institutions of European countries for failing to provide adequate integration support for immigrants. This might, as a consequence, encourage solidarity, empathy, and a better understanding of the particular groups. One of the paper's conclusions directly refuted the Islamophobic conviction that Islamist extremism is widespread among immigrants. Additionally, it clearly demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of immigrants aim to integrate into European societies.

In my view, the research design, tone, and findings were balanced and impartial. However, reflecting on the Heidelberg workshop, I realized that the controversy likely stemmed not from the article's content but from its choice of focus. The very act of addressing Muslim antisemitism as a topic of study appears to have been perceived as inherently problematic, regardless of the scholarly merit of the work.

In this context, French *laïcité* comes to mind. Its secular values of liberty, equality, and fraternity/sorority represent, for me personally, the pinnacle of human achievement. However, it is evident that the concepts and categories underlying policies that restrict the collection of data on individuals or groups based on religion or ethnicity can impede inquiry into the complex aspects of the human condition.

A suitable compromise in this highly sensitive area may be found in the recent, intensive efforts by the European Union (EU) and the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) to promote the collection of so-called "equality data" across mem-

ber states.[22] These initiatives aim to implement comparable mechanisms within national frameworks that not only enhance research findings and provide a broader perspective but also firmly prioritize the highest ethical standards, taking into account the rights, dignity, and potential stigmatization of vulnerable minorities.

Another perspective worth considering is whether the perceived contentiousness of the research topic stems not solely from the vulnerability of the subject group (in this case, Muslims) but also from growing resistance to what some scholars describe as the disproportionate emphasis on Jewish suffering.[23] This discourse, reappearing in the context of post-October 7 debates, echoes elements of the well-documented "Holocaust fatigue", wherein public and academic engagement with Jewish historical trauma encounters criticism or diminishing receptivity.[24] By exploring the potential presence of this argument within the turbulent landscape of volatile emotions, we would likely enter the realm of competitive victimhood – a phenomenon gaining momentum not only within the social sciences at large, but specifically within the framework of Jewish-Muslim relations as exemplified by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## Conference in Prague 2024

In 2022, the European Association of Israel Studies (EAIS) was approached by its older sister, the Association for Israel Studies (AIS), with a request to co-organize the annual conference in 2024. For the AIS, this would mark their 40$^{th}$ annual conference – a significant milestone to be celebrated with their first European event. After careful consideration, Charles University in Prague was identified as an ideal venue, due to the university's reputation and, not least, due to the relatively low levels of antisemitism in Czechia. As a board member of the EAIS, I was enthusiastic about bringing this proposal to the leadership of the Faculty of Arts, where I am based. The faculty welcomed the proposal from both associations, and preparations began with a broader team of EAIS and AIS colleagues.

**22** European Union (EU) and Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), "Guidance Note on the Collection and Use of Equality Data Based on Racial or Ethnic Origin" (2022), https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-02/guidance_note_on_the_collection_and_use_of_equality_data_based_on_racial_or_ethnic_origin_final.pdf.

**23** Adam Sutcliffe, "Who Counts? Anti-Antisemitism and the Racial Politics of Emotion", *Ethnicities* (2024).

**24** Arlene Stein, "Too Much Memory? Holocaust Fatigue in the Era of the Victim", in *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors, Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

The urgency of convening in 2024 became more pronounced after the cancellation of the 2023 EAIS conference, which was scheduled to take place in Israel but was called off due to the attack. In light of these devastating events, there was a strong sense of necessity to gather and reconnect. As a colleague from Ben-Gurion University, who had been responsible for organizing the 2023 conference, expressed, "We needed to close the circle by coming to Prague". The therapeutic value of this first post-October Israel Studies conference was apparent to many of us. The submitted abstracts conveyed a deep sense of importance, reflecting the emotional toll and the collective need to process the events.

Following the tragic shooting at the Faculty of Arts building in December, concerns emerged that the faculty might reconsider hosting the conference, given the heightened security risks. Despite these valid concerns, the dean's collegium remained firm in its commitment to hosting the event, even going so far as to request police protection. The Czech police responded with a high level of professionalism, and we held several meetings with the head of the perimeter unit as well as with the counter-terrorism and extremism department. Further, we worked closely with the university's security team,[25] which had been strengthened in the wake of the December incident. However, due to the aforementioned security environment, it became necessary to additionally hire a private security company, which significantly increased the conference's overall costs.

Despite all these extensive measures, our overwhelming sense of responsibility for the safety of over 550 active speakers remained. Members of the organizing team based at North American campuses shared alarming testimonies about the escalating situation. Some had even been assigned personal bodyguards for walking through their campuses. During the spring, we gathered a significant amount of information from the security sector – information we hoped we would never need to use. During one of our meetings, we discussed how many minutes a police dog can search for explosives before getting tired. We learned that it is only twenty. The conference venue was scheduled to be searched for explosives early in the morning on the first day and potentially every morning thereafter, depending on the situation.

Our nervosity escalated when we found out that a lecture by Ilan Pappé was scheduled just four days before our conference at the same venue. This lecture was only disclosed with 48 hours' notice. While Pappé's visit to Prague was not his first and had been previously announced, the sudden revelation of the venue came as a surprise to us, intensifying the already high levels of concern.

**25** CUNI security team: https://www.ukforum.cz/en/main-categories/news/9319-cu-security-creating-a-safety-culture-is-very-important.

We were dealing with two, possibly distinct security threats, each requiring different – and at times, contradictory – responses. One potential risk was a pro-Palestinian demonstration on the first morning during participant registration, when hundreds of attendees would be waiting in line outside the building. In this case, we needed to bring everyone inside as quickly as possible. At the same time, if a credible threat lurked among the crowd, relying on rushed checks or cursory questioning would be insufficient. These two parallel scenarios consumed much of our time and imagination as we prepared for all contingencies.

When asked by security experts to assess which panels posed the highest potential risk, we regrettably had to say that our keynote session was likely among them. This was not only due to its significance as the most attended and prominent time slot but also because of the sensitive nature of the topic. We had chosen an innovative format for the keynote, featuring a dialogical discussion between two distinguished speakers: Ilan Troen, a founding figure in the field of Israel Studies, and Mohammad Darawshe, the director of Givat Haviva's Center for a Shared Society.[26] Both speakers, who have dedicated significant parts of their personal and professional lives to fostering Jewish-Arab coexistence in Israel, tragically lost family members in the October 7 terror attack. The very idea of a functioning partnership between Jews and Arabs is a symbolic threat to terrorist organizations, for whom any movement toward normalization or convivencia is seen as a betrayal of their cause.[27]

Following this logic, and given the diverse makeup of our active participants, including a significant number of Arabs, Palestinians, and Druze – the majority of whom were traveling from Israel – it was clear that their panels and roundtables also represented high-security risks. One notable aspect is worth mentioning in this context. In the Call for Papers, we took a bold step by introducing a new submission category: "Israel and Muslim-Jewish Relations in the Diaspora". This category was conceived before October 7, yet we could not have anticipated how timely and relevant it would become.

## Virtually Invisible

It is somewhat ironic that this conference, originally intended to amplify the study of Israel in Central-Eastern Europe and, given its global participation, to resonate internationally, soon shifted in focus. By the spring term, we realized

**26** Givat Haviva, "Shared Society, Shared future", https://www.givathaviva.org/.

**27** This environment is also convincingly depicted in Lizzy Doron's intriguing book, *Who the Fuck is Kafka?* (Munich: dtv, 2015).

that the greatest achievement would be if the conference could simply take place at all. Following security recommendations, we vanished from the digital sphere: no program, no venue, and no names of participants or institutions were to be found online. This virtual invisibility became symbolic of our efforts to navigate the complex and uncertain environment we faced.

Ultimately, the keynote session titled "On the Potential of Listening to Each Other: An Exploration of The New Momentum in Israel and Beyond"[28] – along with the entire conference – proved to be a tremendous success. Remarkably, none of our participants experienced any physical or psychological harm, which we regarded as nothing short of a small miracle.

Eventually, despite a year and a half of preparatory work, the only public attention the conference received was a brief article in a Czech journal focused on critical social issues. The article's reductive premediated description of the event oscillated between criticizing the lack of transparency or rather limited information disclosed due to security protocols and selectively mentioning a few paper titles as evidence of an alleged lack of balanced perspectives. Notably absent from the coverage was any acknowledgment that this was the largest conference on Israel Studies to date, featuring 163 panels and participants from across Europe, Israel, Ukraine, North America, India, Japan, and Brazil, as well as a keynote designed to foster intercommunal dialogue.

## Israel Studies as a "Jewish Space"

One of the reviewers of this essay posed a thought-provoking question: To what extent can Israel Studies be considered a "Jewish space"?

For context, this essay – and my involvement in this project – was preceded by the participation in the highly inspiring event "A Jewish Europe? Virtual and Real-Life Spaces in 21st Century Europe", held in 2022 in Sweden and co-organized by the University of Gothenburg and the University of Southampton. The convenors of this conference, who also served as editors of its written outcomes, Maja Hultman and Joachim Schlör, argued in their introductory chapter that academic Jewish Studies can be considered a "Jewish space"[29] in the sense originally coined by Diana Pinto.[30]

**28** See the AIS-EAIS conference program, Prague (2024), https://aisisraelstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/8.-Conference-Program-Book.pdf.

**29** Maja Hultman and Joachim Schlör, "Introducing a Virtual Approach to European Jewish Spaces in the Twenty-First Century", *Contemporary Jewry* 44 (2024): 245–59 (at p. 258).

**30** Diana Pinto, "A New Jewish Identity for Post-1989 Europe", *JPR Policy Paper* 1 (1996), 1–15.

To this day, a growing body of scholarship explores not only the development of Israel Studies but also the overlaps with Jewish Studies, their (un)intentional merging, the positioning of Israel Studies within Middle Eastern Studies, and the geopolitical motivations and challenges of these seemingly distinct but interconnected domains.[31] However, the broader question posed by the reviewer – to what extent is Israel Studies a "Jewish space"? – offers an opportunity to touch upon Diana Pinto's ideas, which have significantly shaped discourse on Jewish life in post-1990 Europe.

## Protected Safe Spaces

In the Call for Papers for the AIS-EAIS conference, the convenors committed to work tirelessly to create a "safe space where diverse scholarship is included and respected". As mentioned earlier, in the context of security measures, the Prague event was attended not only by Israeli and American Jewish speakers but also by Arab, Palestinian, and many non-Jewish and non-Arab scholars from around the world. Although discussions were often intense – reflecting the attempts of reconciling conflicting individual and collective narratives – the omnipresent spirit remained welcoming and mutually supportive.

In line with Pinto's vision of a "Jewish space" as embracing, pluralistic, open to all, and democratic, Israel Studies strives to uphold this ethos within the limited, well-protected spaces where genuine academic dialogue can thrive. Despite facing accusations of being used instrumentally for hasbara (public diplomacy) purposes, the field has developed a multifaceted language of expression that accommodates a wide range of conflicting perspectives and radical ideas while preserving the delicate balance of open and safe discourse. Although Pinto's ideal of "Jewish spaces" has (yet again) to materialize in Europe, we can observe an "Israel Studies space" rising despite – or perhaps because of – the demanding circumstances.

**31** Cf. Johannes Becke, "Methodological Canaanism: The Case for a Rupture Between Jewish Studies and Israel Studies", in *Jewish Studies and Israel Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Intersections and Prospects*, ed. Christian Wiese and Katharina Herold (Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2019), pp. 199–217; Johannes Becke, Michael Brenner, and Daniel Mahla (eds.), *Israel-Studien Geschichte – Methoden – Paradigmen* (Munich: Zentrum für Israel-Studien, LMU München, 2020); Ilan S. Troen, "Israel as a Field of Study: Historic Overview", in *The Oxford Handbook of Israeli Politics and Society*, ed. Reuven Y. Hazan, Alan Dowty, Menachem Hofnung, and Gideon Rahat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 19–35.

The difficult, authentic, and deeply personal dialogue between Ilan and Mohammad, alongside contributions from other panelists, not only exemplifies a thriving "Jewish space" but also encourages us to reimagine Europe at its peak – emerging boldly from the current dark times.

## Post Scriptum

There is no doubt that the recent period has been marked by profound transformations in both the academic and personal spheres of those engaged with Jewish and Israel Studies. The events of October 7 not only reignited historical traumas but also intensified longstanding fractures – both within Israeli Jewish and diasporic communities and in their interactions with respective local and international circles. The evolving, often fluid, discourses surrounding Jewish identity, diaspora relations, and academic freedom – as briefly examined in this chapter – attest to the persistent entanglement of historical memory, contemporary geopolitics, and personal lived experiences.

At the same time, the volatile landscape of Jewish-Muslim relations in Europe, coupled with the apparent instrumentalization of minority communities in political narratives – manifested through processes of collective othering – unveils ambiguous undercurrents that merit further exploration. As polarization intensifies in academic and public debates, we urgently need in-depth, historically grounded discussions that resist oversimplified binaries. The Prague conference, despite unprecedented challenges, ultimately embodied this imperative by creating a space – no matter how fragile – for encounters and intellectual exchange in a moment of deep uncertainty.

The narrative battles, the demands for (in)visibility, and the burden of representation indicate broader societal shifts in an increasingly fragmented world. The reflections in this essay emphasize the importance of maintaining academic integrity in the face of pressures and agendas while humbly acknowledging the myth of neutrality. Recognizing the complexity of people's lived experiences helps maintain both rigor and empathy in scholarship. Given that spaces for open discussion may be shrinking, it is more vital than ever to encourage critical inquiry and genuine, all-embracing conversations.

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