

Karolina Zielińska
University of Warsaw (Poland)

Discussing Israeli Identities

The 6th Annual Conference on Israeli Studies *Israeli Identities: Past, Present and Future*, Wrocław, (September 10–12, 2017), University of Wrocław & European Association of Israel Studies.

Abstract: The paper reports from the proceedings of the 6th Annual Conference on Israeli Studies *Israeli Identities: Past, Present and Future* which took place at the University of Wrocław on September 10–12, 2017. The report reflects on the discussions which took place during plenary sessions of the conference and on the contents of the conference panels. Furthermore, it assesses the importance of this international event for the field of Israeli studies.

Keywords: *conference report; Israeli studies; modern Israel; international relations.*

The 6th Annual Conference of the European Association of Israel Studies took place at the University of Wrocław, Poland, from 10th till 12th of September, 2017. Its leitmotif, *Israeli Identities: Past, Present and Future* attracted wide participation of European and Israeli scholars dealing with a range of subjects related to modern Israel.

The conference opened with a keynote speech by professor and ambassador Itamar Rabinovich, President of the Israel Institute, who discussed the life and legacy of the late Yitzhak Rabin: his place among the “native sons” of Israeli policymakers and his last years in office, which were devoted to a search for the peaceful resolution of conflicts between Israel and its neighbours.

The conference’s plenary debates witnessed vibrant discussions of issues related to the condition of Israeli democracy. Israeli Prize laureates Ruth Gavison (professor of law, one of the founders of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel) and Sammy Smooha (professor emeritus of Sociology at the University of Haifa, formerly dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and President of the Israeli Sociological Society) argued about the necessary conditions for Israel being both a Jewish and democratic state; about the changing make-up of Israeli

society and politics in terms of the right-wing/left-wing spectrum, the role of religious constituents and the Arab minority; and about the fear of sectorialisation. In a subsequent debate, led by Dr. Alan Craig (the Chair of the European Association of Israel Studies and Pears Lecturer in Israel and Middle East Studies, University of Leeds), Professor Gavison discussed the role of the Israeli High Court of Justice, which evolved from the role of the highest court of appeal to also include the role of the constitutional court. The Court's activism and independence coupled with rulings which followed from the 1992 adoption of basic laws on individual rights are behind the current standing of the Court in the political system of Israel.

An outstanding number of 31 thematic panels and 2 roundtables took place within 5 sessions. The panels dealt with such varied issues as the patterns of memory, the evolution of Zionism, the burden of the occupation, minorities in Israel, the Israeli political and social system, historical and contemporary relations between Israel and the European countries (as well as the European Union), Israeli development and innovations, or genres of Israeliness as seen in various forms of cultural expression. In essence, the panels, while fully adhering to the topic of the conference, presented a thorough overview of contemporary studies on modern Israel carried out by researchers representing manifold disciplines within social, economic and humanistic studies. The roundtables, in which scholars were joined by practitioners (including Undersecretary of State in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Marek Magierowski) discussed Polish-Israeli relations: impacts of history; and entrepreneurship.

The conference concluded with a screening of "*The Ancestral Sin*" documentary movie created by David Deri, Doron Galezer and Ruth Yuval, followed by a vibrant discussion with one of the authors – Doron Galezer. The film, taking an example of the city of Yerucham and its Moroccan inhabitants, tells a story of the fate of Oriental Jews' immigration to Israel, marred by the policy of population dispersal within so called "development towns".

This highly successful conference witnessed top-level academic exchange of knowledge and debate. It was also a great networking occasion for scholars. Without a doubt, the fact that the Annual Conference of the European Association of Israel Studies has been co-organised and hosted by the University of Wrocław was of outmost importance for Polish academics and analysts preoccupied with Israeli studies. As the years' largest and most prominent event in the field to take place in the country, it served as a meeting point for Polish researchers of modern Israel and also stimulated their cooperation with scholars coming from other European countries and from Israel.

Author

Dr Karolina Zielińska

University of Warsaw, Faculty of Political Science and International Studies. Contact details: karolina9krln@gmail.com.