

A View from Overseas: Teaching and Reflecting on U.S.- Israel Relations in Jerusalem

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Editor's Note: The following essay is part of the Passport series, "A View from Overseas," which features short pieces written by scholars outside of the United States, examining the views held by the people and government in their country about the United States. SHAFR members who are living abroad, even temporarily, or who have contacts abroad who might be well-positioned to write such pieces are encouraged to contact the editor at passport@shafri.org. AJ

As a postdoctoral fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a newly minted PhD from Cambridge, I taught my first seminar this year. On the first day of class, I asked the students in "The Creation of the U.S.-Israel Alliance, 1948-1969" why they had chosen to take my course. There were 27 Israelis, 2 Palestinians, and 1 American in the class, and their reasons for enrolling in the class varied. Some of the students explained that they had taken the course to satisfy Hebrew University's English-language requirement, but others were enrolled because of their interest in the historical bonds between America and Israel. They were aware of the fraught relations between the Obama administration and the government of Benjamin Netanyahu after Netanyahu's decision to support Mitt Romney publicly during the 2012 presidential campaign.¹

As the students introduced themselves, I heard many names that were new to me, including Lior, Lital, Moriah, Neva, Gili, Shir, Yativ, Amit, and Itai, but also some that were familiar, such as Elliot, Max, Gregory, David, Miriam, and Rebecca. The majority of the students were older, as most Israelis, except for Arab Israelis, are conscripted into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) for several years. The students' backgrounds were diverse. Two French students had made *aliya* (emigrated) to Israel, and two other students had grown up in America but had made *aliya* to Israel.² A number of the Israeli students explained that they had family in the United States near Los Angeles and New York City, where there are large Jewish communities. The American student was enrolled at the University of Wisconsin and studying abroad for the year at Hebrew University. One Israeli student's family had business interests in the United States: his family sold thatched huts to Jewish Americans to celebrate the Jewish autumn harvest festival of Sukkot. Another student had lived in Washington DC for a time when he served as the personal assistant to Major General Gadi Shamni, who was, until recently, IDF military attaché to the United States.³

The class met for an hour and a half each week

from February to June and was conducted in English. The seminar examined U.S. involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict from 1948 to 1969, analyzing the cultural, political, and strategic reasons for the emergence of the alliance between Israel and the United States during that period. Our meetings generally consisted of discussions of the weekly readings, which included both primary and secondary source materials.

I had access to a classroom projector to show video clips, such as Abba Eban's television appearances in the 1950s and 1960s, to demonstrate how media portrayals of the Arab-Israeli conflict affected American perceptions of it.⁴ We also discussed Eban's writings on Israel from the 1950s, in which Eban argued that Israel and America's "special relationship" was a manifestation of their shared political and cultural values.⁵ One of our classes was, in part, devoted to a discussion of the influence of the blockbuster 1960 film, *Exodus*, on Americans' perceptions of Israel.⁶

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The round table in the classroom was ideal for discussing the evolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1950s and 1960s and the origins of the U.S.-Israel alliance. Several Israelis in the class informed me they supported the concept of *Eretz Israel*, which is generally translated from its Biblical usage as "the Land of Israel" and includes the territories that Israel conquered in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Other students were outspoken in their opposition to Israel's settlements in the occupied territories and believed that Israel's permanent expansion of its borders would render it impossible for the nation to remain democratic and demographically Jewish in character, given the large numbers of Palestinians residing in the occupied territories.⁷

Class discussion would sometimes become quite intense. My students' parents and grandparents had experienced the events of the 1950s and 1960s that we discussed in class, and those events still resonated strongly in Israeli and Palestinian society. Some issues elicited emotional reactions from the students, including the Palestinian refugee problem that originated in the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948. A short clip of an interview of United Arab Republic President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s, discussing Israel's creation and the Palestinian refugees' plight, proved provocative; one student even objected to having it shown in class.⁸ However, others felt that it was important to show both sides of the issues in the Arab-Israeli dispute. They noted that some of their own grandparents had been refugees from Europe during World War II.

My Palestinian students, who were young women from Beit Hanina and the Old City, both located in East Jerusalem, told me they did not feel comfortable speaking

in class because of the politically charged atmosphere in Jerusalem. I agreed that they could submit written critiques of the weekly readings as a substitute for class participation. Both students chose to write about the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948 and the causes of the Palestinian refugee problem. Their papers reflected their belief that the Palestinian refugee problem continues to embody the Palestinians' and Arabs' sense of grievance that Israel was established with British and American support in a land that the Palestinians had regarded as their own. One of them also wanted to write a more contemporary study of the problems confronting Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, as Palestinian inhabitants of East Jerusalem do not enjoy Israeli citizenship despite living under Israeli control. East Jerusalem is considered occupied territory.⁹

The class focused on the first two decades of U.S.-Israel relations, but often the conversation in class would turn to more contemporary developments in the Arab-Israeli dispute. During weeks when we discussed John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson's first major arms sales to Israel, my Israeli students expressed their gratitude to the United States for its assistance to Israel in developing the Iron Dome missile shield technology that enabled Israel to neutralize most incoming missiles from the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, my Palestinian students confided in me that they felt frustrated with American policy. They believed that if Israel was going to claim to be democratic like America, the United States ought to exert greater pressure on Israel to grant full citizenship to the Palestinians living under Israeli control in the occupied territories or permit the Palestinians to establish a sovereign state.

While teaching last spring, I conducted research at the Abba Eban papers housed at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute at Hebrew University into Eban's role in fortifying the U.S.-Israel alliance in the 1950s and 1960s. I also organized an international conference entitled "Beyond Reapolitik: Cultural, Religious, and Political Influences on U.S.-Israel Relations" at Hebrew University, which was sponsored by the Davis Institute and the Israel Institute of Washington DC. The conference, held on May 25, 2014, fostered a discussion among scholars based in Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the reasons for the emergence and durability of the U.S.-Israel alliance.¹⁰ Fellow SHAFR members Zach Levey and Andrew Preston delivered very well-received papers, Levey's on "The United States, Israel and Nuclear Desalination, 1964-1968," and Preston's on "Ties that Bind: Religious Liberty and the American-Israeli Special Relationship." The perspective of panel participant Eran Etzion on "miscommunication" between Israeli and American officials was especially interesting, given his former role as head of policy planning in the Israeli government. A shared conclusion emerged from the papers: religion, ideology, and political considerations underlie the U.S.-Israel alliance, but during the Cold War and in the post-9/11 period perceptions of U.S. strategic interests strongly reinforced U.S.-Israel cooperation.

I was fortunate to be able to teach my course before the violence in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip during this past summer. I reflected on the fact that Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis, and Palestinians from East Jerusalem have returned to their classes at Hebrew University this year, just as they have done throughout intermittent war and violence in the past. The university is one of the city's few shared spaces—a place where Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis, and Palestinians from East Jerusalem can interact on an equal footing. The light rail train line linking the eastern and western halves of Jerusalem that I took to work every day was once another such shared space, but rioting destroyed the stations in three Palestinian neighborhoods in July of 2014, and very few Palestinians make use of the line now.¹¹

I learned as much from my students as they did from my course. Whereas most of my previous experience had consisted of researching the Arab-Israeli conflict and the U.S.-Israel relationship from an academic perspective, most of my students and colleagues at Hebrew University had been living the Arab-Israeli conflict their whole lives, and their viewpoints were illuminating. I am very grateful to the Davis Institute for enabling me to spend a very memorable year in Jerusalem.

Notes:

1. Harriet Sherwood, "Binyamin Netanyahu Gambles on Mitt Romney Victory," *The Guardian*, September 20, 2012.
2. On the reasons for the increasing number of French Jews emigrating to Israel in recent years, see Dan Bilefsky, "Number of French Jews Emigrating to Israel Rises," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2014.
3. Yoav Zitun, "Major-General Gadi Shamni Quits IDF," *Ynet News*, January 11, 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4300050,00.html>.
4. See, for instance Abba Eban's interview on *The Mike Wallace Interview*, ABC, April 12, 1958, http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/eban_abba.html.
5. In this connection, see Abba Eban, "Israel: The Emergence of a Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 29, 3 (April, 1951): 424-35; and Abba Eban, *Voice of Israel* (London, 1958).
6. Melani McAlister discusses the influence of *Exodus* in America in her book, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (Berkeley, 2001), 159-65.
7. In July 2014, the CIA reported a population of 2,731,052 living in the West Bank (East Jerusalem included), counting Israeli settlers. Eighty-three percent of the population is Palestinian, 17 percent is Jewish. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/we.html>.
8. Nasser interview by Clifton Daniel, managing editor of *The New York Times*, April 19, 1969, *News in Perspective*. Also available in book form as *A Complete Transcript of National Educational Television's "News in Perspective": Interview with President Gamal Abdel Nasser*. (National Educational Television, 1969).
9. B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization, reported that as of 2010, 59.6 percent of Jerusalem's residents were living in areas of the city that Israel occupied in 1967 (39.3 percent of whom were Jews, and 60.7 percent Palestinians). See <http://www.btselem.org/jerusalem>.
10. The participants included Noam Kochavi of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Zach Levey of the University of Haifa, Ziv Rubinovitz of the University of Haifa, Joel Peters of Virginia Tech, Amnon Cavari of the Lauder School of Government, IDC Herzliya, Jonathan Rynhold of Bar-Ilan University, Andrew Preston of Cambridge University, Myron (Mike) Aronoff of Rutgers University, Eran Shalev of the University of Haifa, Piki Ish-Shalom of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Eran Ezion, visiting fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute, Claire Spencer, director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, and myself.
11. Judi Rudoren, "In Divided Jerusalem, Rail Line for Arabs and Jews Is Among the Fractures," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/14/world/middleeast/in-divided-jerusalem-rail-line-for-arabs-and-jews-is-among-the-fractures.html>.