

Jarosław Jarząbek

University of Wrocław (Poland)

Marcin Szydzisz

University of Wrocław (Poland)

Beyond “Recognition”.

The Polish Perspectives on Israeli and Palestinian National Identities: Preliminary Assumptions of Research

Abstract: The paper aims to provide an overview of the main streams of perception of Israeli and Palestinian national identities by Polish authorities and society, as well as analyze their sources. The study covers the period of time when both of the national identities took shape, that is since the beginning of the mass Jewish migration to Palestine at the beginning of the XXth century until the present time. As the Jews have for a long time been an important part of Polish history and society, Poles have a strong perception of Jewish, and consequently also Israeli, identity. Polish Jews, who played a crucial role in establishing the Israeli state and shaping Israeli national identity, were treated by many Poles as “our Jews”. This perception was conditioned by internal factors, such as social relations, cultural proximity, historical memory or political views. In contrast, a perception of the Palestinian identity from the very beginning was conditioned externally, because it resulted from international political developments and a narrative imposed by foreign powers. Another special feature of the Polish perception of Israeli and Palestinian identity is the fact that public opinion very often differs significantly from the political position of state authorities.

Keywords: *national identity; Israelis; Palestinians; perception; Polish perspective*

A complex and multidimensional matter of the national identities¹ of Israelis and Palestinians has been variously perceived by states and societies throughout the world. Usually, the factors influencing the specific perception consisted of, but were not limited to, the traditional

¹ National identity is understood here in a constructivist perspective, as socially “constructed and conveyed in discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture” (Wodak et al., 1999). As a product of discourse, consequently, it can be also perceived from “outside” by following the national discourse.

patterns of amity and enmity, cultural proximity, current political interests, historical experiences and societal attitudes. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the main streams of perception of Israeli and Palestinian national identities by Polish authorities and society, as well as analyze the reasons of such perception. The study will cover the period of time when both of the national identities were taking shape, that is since the beginning of the mass Jewish migration to Palestine at the beginning of the XXth century until the present time. A special feature of the Polish perception of Israeli and Palestinian identity was the fact that public opinion often differed significantly from the political position of state authorities.

Specific conditions

The Polish perspective on the Israeli and Palestinian national identities has been undoubtedly influenced by Poland's own history and hardships. The partition of Poland at the end of the XVIIIth century and the consecutive struggle for independence that lasted for 123 years left a mark on Polish culture, mentality and national character (Davis, 2005; Snyder 2004). Poland's own tradition of the fight against all odds against much more powerful enemies made society sympathetic towards nations and groups that were in a similar situation and aroused a general compassion for the weaker side in various conflicts. This, in turn, resulted in a broad endorsement of freedom fighters and independence movements around the world in Polish society. For that reason, Polish perception of Israeli and Palestinian national identities went far beyond a simple recognition of national right and interest. In a societal dimension, it has been strongly emotional and shaped by historical conditions and experiences. On a state level, on the other hand, it has been more often shaped by the geopolitical situation and third-party interests than Poland's own national goals.

The Jewish community in Poland

To understand the complex relations between Poles and Jews and a specific Polish perception of Jewish and Israeli national identity it is first necessary to take a close look at the history of Jewish society in Poland and position of Polish authorities towards Jewish independence at different times. The presence of Jewish society on Polish soil dates back to the Xth century. The number of Jews in Poland was growing continuously. Before the Second World War Jews constituted a significant and important part of society in the Polish Second Republic, being important contributors to the cultural, political, religious, scientific and societal development of the country. In 1939 Markus (1983, p. 174) estimated that the number of Jews in Poland had reached almost 3.5 million.

The Jewish community in Poland varied widely in terms of its own perception of Jewish identity and political goals. One of three most important Jewish sociopolitical movements was Zionism, which competed with Jewish orthodoxy (whose most significant representative

was Agudas Isroel) and autonomous leftist groups (eg. Bund). The Zionist movement itself was also very diverse. In Poland supporters of Zionism ranged from socialists (such as Polej Syjon) to Jewish orthodox (eg. Mizrachi). Before the Second World War Jewish political parties in Poland contested the elections, where they sometimes gained a considerable level of support. In 1922, for example, there were 35 Jewish representatives in the Sejm (the lower chamber of the Polish parliament) and 12 in the Senate (the upper chamber). Of them, 24 deputies in the Sejm and 7 Senators belonged to Zionist parties (Tomaszewski, 1993, p. 219). In 1938, in the last parliament before the outbreak of the war Polish Jews had five deputies to the Sejm (three represented the Zionist movement) and two to the Senate (one Zionist) (Rudnicki, 2004, pp. 411–419).

Polish authorities collaborated with the various Jewish political forces including the Zionist movement, but until the mid-1930s had no official position towards matters concerning Jewish national identity, migration to Palestine or the establishment there of a national home for Jewish people. Then the Polish Sanation government decided to diplomatically support Jewish aspirations for independence in Palestine, mainly in order to intensify Jewish emigration from Poland. Rising nationalist sentiment, both in the government and in Polish society, caused a gradual deterioration of Polish-Jewish relations. Thus Polish support for all Jewish movements that promoted Jewish emigration to the Holy Land was motivated by the desire to get Jews to leave the country, rather than by a willingness to support their national aspirations. Emigration to Palestine was especially important for the Revisionist Zionist organization established by Zeev (Włodzimierz) Żabotyński, who negotiated with the Polish government and promoted the facilitation of Jewish migration. His proposals included the transfer of 750 thousand Polish Jews to Palestine within 10 years. Polish authorities helped Revisionist Zionists to finance and train some military groups, but the project of mass Jewish emigration from Poland was not accomplished (Tomaszewski, 1993, p. 234)².

The situation changed dramatically after the Second World War. The extermination of Jews by the Germans meant that the Jewish community practically ceased to exist. Professor Józef Adelson (1993, p. 398) estimated that Jewish society in Poland in June 1946 consisted of only 250 thousand people. In the newly created Polish People's Republic Jews initially had a limited autonomy that allowed for the existence of specific Jewish committees. The committees could organize charitable, educational and cultural activities as well as run production cooperatives for the Jewish communities. For a brief period of time, until October 1946, Jews had also the right to legally emigrate from Poland to Palestine. Then the authorities began to impede migration and after February 1947 the borders were officially closed (Szaynok, 2000, p. 99). The most important Jewish organization of that time in Poland was the Socio-Cultural Association of Jews (Towarzystwo Społeczno Kulturalne Żydów – TSKŻ) established in 1950. Until 1956 it was entirely dependent on the Polish communist

² More on that i.a. in Weinbaum (1993) and Melzer (1997).

authorities. It served as a “transmission belt” for the communist principles into the Jewish community (Berendt, 2009, p. 170).

The changing position of Poland towards Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict

After the proclamation of Israel’s independence, Poland was one of the first countries to recognize the existence of this state. This step was as much a result of the duplication of the USSR’s actions as a result of Poland’s own conviction of its rightness. For example during the United Nations General Assembly meeting in November 1947 Polish representative, Ksawery Pruszyński, gave an impassioned speech, referencing his own early experience of Palestine as well as the suffering that the Germans caused to the Poles and Jews (Pruszyński – ONZ, *Fakty o Izraelu*, p. 7–11; Pruszyński, 1999, p. 109–129). Since the beginning of 1950, however, the attitude of Polish authorities towards the state of Israel started to change because of the rising hostility between Israel and the Soviet Union. This hostility reached its apogee during the Six-Day War and the years 1967–68. It was then that the Arab-Israeli conflict became part of the Cold War conflict, in which the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries controlled by it supported the Arab states.

The opinion of the Polish public was, however, completely different in this matter than the official position of the Polish authorities. The circles of Polish Jews were, of course, completely contrary to the government’s opinion, which is confirmed by documents from that period. In one of them, a report of secret services from the surveillance of the Jewish community in Dzierżoniów, we read, for example, that Jews there claimed that “... people’s democracies are Moscow’s puppets, they go on their leash” (Archiwum Akt Nowych, 1967, p. 39–40). In June 1967 Poland and other member states of the Warsaw Pact (except for Romania) broke off their diplomatic relations with Israel (Eisler and Sasanka, 2003, p. 5; Stankowski, 2001). Władysław Gomułka, then secretary general of the Polish United Workers’ Party and *de facto* leader of the state, condemned Israeli aggression and declared that the socialist states “fully support” the Arab countries (Rudnicki and Silber, 2009, p. 706–707). The Polish authorities organized also a specific “farewell” to the Jews leaving Poland. During the departure of Israeli diplomats expelled from Poland, the communist authorities organized “spontaneous” social protests. The communist activists gathered at the airport held banners condemning Israeli aggression and chanted offensive slogans, such as “Israeli fascists go away” (Rudnicki and Silber, 2009, p. 710–711).

In the Arab-Israeli conflict Polish public opinion, contrary to the authorities, sympathized with Israeli Jews and cheered their victory in the Six Days War. Confirmation of this can be found in frequently cited quotes, such as the one that “Our Jews bashed the Russkies’ Arabs” (Eisler, 1991, p. 140). The question remains open as to what extent opinions such as this were the result of genuine sympathy towards Jews and Israel, and to what extent they were

merely an expression of opposition to the hated communist authorities. Without a doubt, however, both of these reasons played a role.

The aftermath of the Six Days War and a wave of political hostility towards Israel in the Eastern Bloc was a campaign of anti-Semitism. In the case of Poland, the campaign was also a result of internal tensions in Polish communist party (PZPR) that started in 1968 (Stola, 2000). The anti-Semitic campaign in Poland began with articles in the Polish press, mainly in dailies like "Słowo Powszechnie" and "Trybuna Ludu". The Polish authorities quickly joined in and on March 19, 1968, W. Gomułka, in his infamous speech to communist activists, pointed out the lack of self-determination of some Polish Jews, accusing them of being "...more related to Israel than to Poland" (Stola, 2009, pp. 108–9, 114). It has led to the emigration of the remnants of Polish Jewish population. In total 13 thousand Jews emigrated from Poland, three thousand of them lived in Lower Silesia, and many of them represented the elite of Polish economic, cultural, scientific, and social life (Archiwum Akt Nowych, 1967; Stankowski, 2001, p. 144; Sprawozdania z pracy operacyjnej..., 1969, 1970, pp. 7–8, 72, 100).

At the same time Polish politics towards the Arab world, as well as Polish foreign politics in general, was strictly subordinated to the interest of the Soviet Union and was directed by Cold War logic. In consequence, Poland supported and developed cooperation with those Arab countries that were Soviet client-states, were ruled by socialist (*Ba'athist*) regimes and presented an anti-US and anti-Israeli stance. This included, first and foremost, Egypt (until 1978), Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Libya and South Yemen. On the other hand, the relations with conservative Arab regimes that were mostly allied to the US were almost nonexistent (Piotrowski 1989; Obeidat 2001).

Poland's stance towards the origins and development of Palestinian identity

Interest in the question of Palestine appeared in Poland relatively late. Until the 1970s there was no position of the government of Polish People's Republic and no widespread public opinion towards the Palestinian issues. Poland's political stance towards Palestine and the Palestinians resembled that towards the Arab world and reproduced the Soviet patterns of amity and enmity. The Palestinian national movement had been seen by the Soviet Union (and consequently by Poland) as an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and a socialist one, and as such it could count on support and help. It must be noted that until the late 1960s the Palestinian question itself had not been internationalized. An Israeli-Palestinian struggle had been treated as a part of broader Arab-Israeli conflict and Palestinians were not treated as a separate nation but as part of a larger Arab nation, even by their Arab compatriots (Khalidi, 1997, pp. 180–197).

After Yasser Arafat and the Fatah group took over the leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1968, the Palestinian cause began to be perceived as an independent

international problem and the Palestinian national identity began to develop and consolidate much faster. This internationalization and separation of the Palestinian cause prompted Eastern Bloc countries to take a position and express support for the Palestinians. Polish support for the Palestinians and recognition of their national right had been expressed i.a. in the voting in the UN General Assembly. A few examples of Polish support for the Palestinians in this international forum included voting in favor of the resolutions 3236 and 3237 in 1974 which recognized the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and granted observer status in the UN for the Palestine Liberation Organization, voting in favor of the resolution 3379 in 1975 that indicated Zionism as a form of racism, voting in favor of the resolutions 3275 and 3276 regarding the question of Palestine and inviting the PLO to participate in the efforts for peace in the Middle East, voting in favor of resolution 35/169 in 1980 that rejected the declaration of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, and voting in favor of resolution 43/177 in 1988 that changed the designation from Palestinian Liberation Organization to Palestine in the UN system (UN General Assembly Resolutions).

In the 1970s Polish-Palestinian bilateral relations were also developed. The first permanent Palestinian mission to Poland was established in 1976. In 1982 the two established official diplomatic relations and the rank of the mission was raised to the level of the PLO Embassy. In 1988 Poland recognized the Palestinian declaration of independence and changed the name of the diplomatic mission to the Embassy of Palestine (Szydzisz, 2014, p. 168). At the same time, the public knowledge and the awareness of the Palestinian national identity in Polish society were very scarce. The number of Palestinians coming to Poland was small and mostly limited to students and officials. Probably the authorities of the PRL also kept secret contacts with PLO intelligence and various Palestinian terrorist groups, providing them with weapons, giving shelter, and perhaps also conducting training. Knowledge on this matter is, however, negligible, and the information is more often journalistic than scientific (Gasztold, 2017; PRL "opiekowała się" palestyńskimi terrorystami?, 2006).

After the transformation – the III Polish Republic

When the Eastern Bloc had fallen and Poland regained its independence in 1989, the authorities of the Third Polish Republic could again determine Polish foreign politics without any external interference. It resulted, among other things, in the re-establishment of the Israeli-Polish diplomatic relations in February 1990 (Protocol of the establishment..., 1990). This initiated a process of quick and intense development of the Israeli-Polish relations in the 1990s and the first decades of the twenty-first century. These relations covered a variety of areas, including in particular economic, political, societal, military, cultural, and educational cooperation.

Political transformation in Poland not only opened a new era in relations with Israel but also significantly changed the way in which the Jewish state was presented. Israel was no more portrayed as the source of all the evil in the Middle East and the public discourse

in Poland was focused on balancing Polish-Arab and Polish-Israeli relations. Over time, however, Polish policy has gradually evolved into a close partnership with Israel. The disproportions in Poland's relations with the PLO and Israel may be best illustrated by the difference in the number of mutual contacts, the seriousness of the problems raised, or even the number of articles and studies devoted to relationships with one and the other. While Polish-Israeli relations were and are one of the more frequent topics of press articles, the subject of Polish-Palestinian relations is hardly discussed. This intensity and multidimensionality of Polish-Israeli contacts since the beginning of the 1990s has overshadowed and largely marginalized relations with the Palestinians.

The Polish position towards the solution of Israeli-Palestinian conflict had also evolved from pro-Palestinian one prior to 1989 to a more balanced one. Since then it remains mostly intact and successive Polish governments stress the need for a two-state solution, underlining Palestinians' right to create their own statehood and at the same time emphasize Israel's right to existence and security. Thus, in principle, the Polish position was consistent with projects sponsored by the UN, proposals of the Middle East Quartet and general frameworks of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process (Oslo Accords). Nevertheless, no Polish government undertook any major diplomatic efforts aimed at greater involvement in the peace process or the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The few manifestations of Polish engagement include the invitation of Poland to the conference in Annapolis in 2007 and the initiative of Minister Radosław Sikorski, who during a meeting with Muslim countries ambassadors in January 2008 proposed the preparation of an Israeli-Palestinian roundtable (*Wystąpienie Pana Ministra...*, 2008). What's more, Polish authorities do not even participate in some activities conducted by the European Union. Poland, for example, did not decide to participate in the observation missions carried out under the European Security and Defense Policy in 2007 (Bury, 2008, 261).

Polish access to the European Union raised hopes in Israel that Poland will be "Israeli advocate in the EU structures" (Dyduch, 2010, 126–127). Those hopes have never come fully true but many prominent Polish politicians declared support for Israel. In April 2008 Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, during his visit to Israel, argued that "Israel will not find in the EU a more reliable spokesman of its security (...) than Poland. If Israel sometimes finds some inconsistencies in the position of Europe towards the conflict in the region, Poland is not a source of controversy" (Dyduch, 2012). Likewise, the Polish President Lech Kaczyński assured Israelis that "Poland is a strong voice defending the right of the State of Israel and the Jewish people to live within safe borders" and declared that "Poland is and will be one of Israel's closest allies" (Bielecki, 2008). Some Polish politicians, e.g. former Minister of Defence Bogdan Klich, did not hesitate to state that the Israeli-Polish dialog has a strategic dimension (Klich: *Mamy interesy z Izraelem...*, 2011). The importance of the mutual relationship is also emphasized by the Polish-Israeli joint government meetings that so far have been held twice, in 2011 and 2016. Poland practices similar forms of cooperation with only two other countries: France and Germany.

Polish-Palestinian relations after the end of the Cold War had been reduced to courtesy (and less often official) visits of diplomatic representatives and small (1–2 million PLN) Polish financial aid to Palestinians (Bury, 208, 261). Although not very impressive in comparison to the overall aid to Palestinians by the international community, this aid is a significant part of the overall development assistance provided by the Polish government abroad. During the official visit of the President of Palestinian National Authority, Mahmud Abbas, and foreign minister Riad Al-Malki to Warsaw in February 2009 Poland and Palestine signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of development aid (Sasnal, 2010, 216–217). The agreement supposed to revive mutual cooperation that focuses mainly on technical support, various scholarships, and deliveries of goods, services, equipment, and supplies. Under the agreement, Poland declared payments to the UNRWA budget and financing of developmental and humanitarian projects included in Palestinian national strategic plans (Polska Pomoc, 2011). Apart from regular help for various types of planned activities, the Polish side also provided emergency assistance, eg. 227.000 EUR in 2009 to help the Gaza Strip destroyed by Israelis during the operation *Cast Lead* (Sasnal, 2010, 216).

In the current situation, Poland is not able to play a more important role in the region of the Middle East and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It can be anticipated that Polish authorities will continue to maintain good relations with both the Israelis and the Palestinians, but relations with the Israeli side will remain on an incomparably higher level. Polish actions towards Palestine will continue to be reduced to financial aid and to various diplomatic gestures. An example of this might be a meeting of the presidents of Palestine and Poland in Warsaw in September 2017 which, apart from the general assertions of Polish support for the peace process and an expression of hope for a diplomatic solution to the conflict, did not bring anything new to the mutual relationship (Prezydent Palestyny w Polsce, 2017). It can also be expected that the Polish authorities will not try to infringe Israeli interests and, wherever possible, support the position of Israel or be neutral. In the case of sensitive diplomatic and political issues, Poland usually abstains from voting, such as in the vote on UN General Assembly Resolution ES-10 / L.22 on declaring the status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as "null and void" (UN General Assembly Resolutions, 2017) or in voting on not adopted Security Council resolutions S/2018/516 and S/2018/520 related to "Israel's use of "excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate force" against Palestinian civilians" and "condemning the indiscriminate firing of rockets by Palestinian militants in Gaza towards Israel" respectively (Amid Middle East Violence..., 2018).

Interestingly, neither the politics of the USA nor the European Union apparently influences the official Polish position towards Israel, the Palestinians and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Poland strives to treat both Israelis and Palestinians as separate subjects of international relations, trying to manoeuvre out of the global context of the conflict. This claim may be reassured by the above mentioned recent history of Polish voting in the UN General Assembly and Security Council when it constantly abstains from voting. Furthermore, the changing attitudes of Poles towards both Israelis and Palestinians also seem to remain

moderate. Among people, groups and communities in Israel and Palestine, but often also in the USA and Europe, there are quite commonly extreme attitudes that combine political hostility towards one or the other nation with denying it the right to be a nation at all. The narrative of denying the national identity of the opposing side thus becomes a political tool. It is used by involved parties to undermine the position of the enemies and deny their right to the contested land. In case of Poland, the acceptance or rejection of a state or a national movement policy does not affect the acknowledgment of its national identity.

Polish public opinion towards Israelis and Palestinians again differs from the friendly neutrality and preference given to Israel in the political, economic, social and cultural relations, by the state's authorities. In public opinion polls conducted in 2002, during the Second Intifada, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict aroused a lot of interest in Polish society. Most of the respondents did not favor either side (73%) but those who did sympathized rather with Palestinians (20%) than Israelis (7%) (Konflikt izraelsko-palestyński..., 2002). Another study showed a negative attitude (around 70%) towards the escalation of violence and brutal methods of struggle used by both sides of the conflict (Palestinian terrorist attacks and Israeli retaliatory actions) (Strzeszewski, 2002). More recent events, such as the development of Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the twenty-first century, the stalemate in the peace process, the migrant crisis, rising anti-Islamic views and/or the crisis in Polish-Israeli relations that erupted in early 2018 could have altered the perspective of Polish society and the attitude towards Israelis and Palestinians. Unfortunately, no more recent, reliable data or public opinion polls could be found.

Conclusions

Jews have for a long time been an important part of Polish history and society. For this reason, Poles have a much stronger perception of Jewish than Palestinian identity. Many Poles have their own opinion about Jews and the role of the Jewish population in Polish history, culture, social and political life. Those opinions are often extended to the perception of Israel and Israelis, with all their positive and negative consequences. Polish Jews were treated by Poles as "our Jews", liked or disliked, sometimes loved or hated, but still "our" and "known". This is, however, about to change. After the Holocaust and the emigration of the remnant Jewish population in the post-war period, the Jewish community in Poland remains small. Successive generations of Poles are brought up in a homogeneous society in which Jews are only a part of history, but no longer part of the living social fabric. Over time their perception, and consequently the perception of the state of Israel and Israelis, ceases to be an internal experience and becomes an external observation. In contrast, the perception of the Palestinian identity from the very beginning was conditioned externally, because it resulted from international political developments and a narrative imposed by foreign powers. That does not seem likely to change significantly in the near future. Polish perception of Palestinian identity will continue to be conditioned by general trends prevail-

ing in the international community, mainstream media narrative and general sociological factors determining the mutual perception of the groups of people.

A special feature of the Polish perception of Israeli and Palestinian identity is the fact that public opinion very often differs significantly from the political position of state authorities. This was particularly true during the anti-Semitic campaign in 1968 when Polish society did not share state's resentment towards Israel and Polish Jews were accused of being a "fifth column". Also today there is a similar gap because the social mood is quite different from the strongly pro-Israel attitude of the Polish authorities. In the case of Palestinians today and Israelis back in the 1960s, a distinct tendency is also clearly visible in the form of public support for the weaker party of the conflict. Such a social attitude is obviously not isolated and it certainly does not apply only to Polish society. But it is also certainly not a universal attitude, represented by the societies of all countries and nations.

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Authors

Dr Marcin Szydzisz

University of Wrocław, Institute of International Studies. Contact details: ul. Koszarowa 3/21, 51–149 Wrocław, Poland; email marcin.szydzisz@uwr.edu.pl

Dr Jarosław Jarząbek

University of Wrocław, Institute of International Studies. Contact details: ul. Koszarowa 3/21, 51–149 Wrocław, Poland; email jaroslaw.jarzabek@uwr.edu.pl