



# **Straddling the East-West Divide: A Subjective Israeli Perspective on Muslim Immigration to Europe**

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***Israelis' perception of the phenomenon of Muslim immigration to Europe is characterized by trepidation that is deeply rooted in the shared history of Jews and the peoples on the European continent. A departure from ethnocentric preconceptions has the potential to reveal positive perceptions and attitudes that could relate to the current wave of Muslim immigration.***

Today's wave of Muslim immigration to Europe has led to extensive public and academic debate. Many in Israel seem to be showing particular interest in this issue and ponder how it will impact upon the continent's political identity and heritage – both locally and internationally, how it will shape future European integration and the role of religion in society. It goes without saying that Israelis are also particularly interested in how such demographic changes will shape Europe's policies toward Israel. All of these questions evoke among Israelis – predominantly those of Jewish faith – profound emotions, including a deep sense of suspicion, in the face of what appears to be the “Islamization of Europe.”

This negative view can be understood from two deeply interdependent perspectives. The first has to do with how Israelis project the Arab–Israeli conflict on Europe, where the immigration phenomenon is then perceived to be an extension or expression of Israel's relations with the Arab world and Islam. They see the reality before them as one in which the Middle East is, in effect, relocating to Europe and believe that the characteristic instability of the Levant will soon be exported to Europe as well. This notion is often accompanied by the fear of the exacerbation of the feeling that Israel is an island in an “Islamic ocean”

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and that, if that ocean expands to Europe, Israel will lose a close ally. In this regard, Israeli views about Muslim immigration to Europe are deeply tied to the Arab–Israeli conflict. This does not mean, however, that resolving this conflict is a precondition for a change in Muslim attitudes towards the West generally and Europe specifically, as many Europeans often assert. Rather, it merely underscores the fact that as long as the conflict between Israel and its neighbors persists, the Israeli view of these changes in Europe will be biased, whether this is justified or not.

For this reason, the Israeli perspective emphasizes the dangers that Muslim immigration pose to Europe: the potential loss of identity and shift in values, the Muslim takeover of a continent that has sanctified secularism, the potential departure from European pacifism to more aggressive international engagement, the fluid demographic balance and, of course, the “clash of civilizations.” To substantiate their argument, Israelis highlight symbols such as the ubiquitous mosques across Europe, the many women who cover themselves with the Burka, and those Muslim youths who have turned their back on the continent and went off to fight holy wars in Syria and Iraq.

Imposing the Arab–Israeli conflict on Europe usually expresses itself through nuances that relate to two points of view. The first is premised upon a belief that Europe has been “lost to Islam.” Advocates then examine Israeli policy – both towards the Middle East and more broadly – based on this assertion. The second point of view argues that Israel and Europe share a common destiny and expects Europe to eventually “come to its senses,” put an end to or limit Muslim immigration to Europe, perhaps reexamine its ties with Muslim countries and join the Israeli camp.

The second aspect that shapes the prevailing Israeli attitude towards this phenomenon is the duality of Israel’s attitude towards Europe. This aspect is inextricably linked to the perspective mentioned above. It has been shaped over the course of hundreds of years of common Jewish-European history and now continues to evolve as part of the development of Israeli identity, which, in turn, is inextricably linked to the Jewish and human tragedy that occurred on the European continent during World War II.

Many Israelis of both Ashkenazi and North African descent see in Europe an integral part of their system of values, as well as of their cultural and political heritage. Indeed, Europe was not merely a place where Jews sought temporary refuge on their way to Israel. Rather it is the place where they first received political rights. It was where Jewish culture thrived and Jews were able to make a lasting contribution to society at large. For these Jews, Europe symbolizes the same Judeo-Christian identity that they themselves adhere to in the Middle East, and which sets them apart from their neighbors.

This identity is accentuated in Israel as a result of its conflict with its Arab neighbors, its inability to fully integrate into the region and a desire to differentiate itself from others. On one hand, Israel sees itself as the realization of the Jewish people's aspiration to return to their historical and religious homeland based on a national definition tied to the rise of European nationalism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, Israel's birth symbolizes the closing of a historical circle and, contrary to the views of its neighbors, Israel is indigenous to the Middle Eastern landscape. That said, Israel sets itself apart from the region in which it exists because despite being physically in the East its head and heart are in the Northwest. If the existence of the Jewish people is analogous to an operation targeted at curing a long-lasting disease, then this Israeli point of view is like an implant trying to be absorbed into and accepted by a new body while constantly yearning to return to the body from which it originated.

The duality that exists between Israel and Europe manifests itself against a backdrop of a cognitive dissonance that can be summed up by the hypothetical heading: "Enemies: A Love Story." Many Israelis love Europe and see it as an integral part of their identity. Europe is their largest trading partner and a preferred destination for holidays. It is the same Europe whose values came to fruition on Israel's Kibbutzim, which were critical in ensuring the country's ability to stand on its own two feet in trying times. At the same time, Israelis despise Europe and endlessly remind her that on her soil Jews were persecuted and slaughtered. She is the same continent that "politely" encouraged its own Jews leave and seek their self-determination elsewhere; the same continent that often turned its back on Israel in its hour of need through arms embargos; the same continent that is seen as siding with the Palestinians and prefers to forsake Israel's future and security; and the same continent where anti-Semitism is on the rise as a result of the increase in Muslim immigration.

From this point of view, the surge in Muslim immigration is accompanied by a fear that Europe might distance itself from Israel and of the negative consequences that demographic changes will have on the parties' political, economic and cultural relations. Concurrently, however, Israel's stance has embedded within it a sprinkle of *schadenfreude* in light of the "punishment" Israelis believe Europe will experience as a result of its entrance into the "we suffer as a result of Islam" club.

Taking an outside look at the processes, changes and influences associated with Muslim immigration to Europe can be of great value. However, we must also be cognizant of the emotional cultural, historical and religious biases that exist within the Israeli point of view. To understand this complexity, one could imagine the Israeli psyche "sitting" cross-legged while straddling the divide between East and West. As one leg is steeped in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the other leans on the complicated relationship many Israelis have with Europe. According to this Eastern perspective, the sun is setting on Western dominance.

Taking this view blurs the nuances and depth of this phenomenon by looking at the states of Europe as if they were one unit despite the fact that European countries differ in many features pertaining to the phenomenon of Muslim immigration itself and to its demographic composition. Countries such as the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary and Estonia have virtually no Muslim immigration while in others, such as Great Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, The Netherlands and Sweden it is widespread. In a third group, which includes Albania, Bosnia, Cyprus and Russia, Islam is an integral or even foundational element of a country's history. Furthermore, this Israeli perspective ignores the variety of ways in which Islam manifests itself and is practiced amongst these immigrants, their cultural and national diversity (e.g. Arab Islam as opposed to Asian Islam), the motive for immigrating, and the varying degrees to which different immigrants wish to integrate into the new society that envelopes them.

The complex perspective outlined here represents one Israeli view, albeit a prevalent one. Whether consciously or subconsciously, this perspective sees ways of dealing with the challenge of Muslim immigration to Europe through the prism of how Israel ought to respond were it to be confronted the same challenge. Taking a look from a different angle could offer new opportunities, and not perceive this phenomenon purely as a growing threat. Doing so would allow Israelis a more nuanced view and new opportunities to understand and respond to various aspects of this phenomenon.