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From Israel to South Tyrol - Summary article

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The seminar that took place a couple of weeks ago in South Tyrol was a fascinating event. It included a group of 12 Israeli experts – Jews and Arabs coming from civil society organizations, from the academia and from local government – who came to study the model of South Tyrol's autonomy and examine its relevance to majority-minority relations inside Israel. The seminar was generously and professionally hosted by the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano and by the Regional Lega Coop in cooperation with the European Academy.

In the seminar's four days, the group was exposed to numerous levels of the South Tyrol model – from meeting with the President of the Province, the Mayor of Bolzano and the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Provincial Parliament, through meetings with economic and civil society organizations to touring the Ladin villages in the nearby valleys. The aim of all these encounters was one – to gain a deeper and nuanced understanding of the South Tyrol model, its historical development and its current dilemmas, in order to examine its possible relevance to the Israeli context. And in fact, despite numerous differences between these two realities (some of the most obvious ones are that, while in South Tyrol all three language groups share a single religion, in Israel the ethnic conflict is coupled by a religious one; the geographical concentration of German-speakers in South Tyrol as opposed to the geographical dispersion of the Arab minority in Israel and the fact that while for Italy the German- and Ladin speaking minorities represent about 0.5% of its population, in Israel the Arab minority is 20% of the country's total population) it seems that there are important lessons to learn from the experience of Alto Adige.

The first important point raised was the issue of the historical context, which includes an Italian occupation of the Bolzano region and consequent attempts to resolve the dilemma created by the presence of a German-speaking minority there. Attempts to forcefully integrate and subdue this minority in the Fascist period proved untenable, leading only to increased clashes and a growing sense of alienation by German-speakers. In a sense, Italy's decision to insist on maintaining its control over South Tyrol in a democratic and peaceful manner came with a specific "price-tag" – of granting preference to the German-speaking minority via autonomous statutes. The Israeli group was consequently impressed by what they termed "the wise and courageous" decision taken by Italy in 1971, which granted an autonomous statute to the area, thus replacing policies of discrimination with special protection for the minorities; adding to individual rights also the recognition of group rights and group identity. The indisputable economic success of the region (that developed from being among Italy's poorest regions to being the country's richest one) was seen as a central factor

which has a crucial importance in mitigating the inter-group tensions and helping the groups co-exist. Many of the Israeli participants saw this economic success as a way in which the "generosity of the majority towards the minority" allowed past feelings of victimhood and phobia to be overcome and through which the minority was given a growing sense of security and confidence. Many felt this was a model to follow.

The question raised in this regard, however, was related to the perception of the Israeli group that the model has maybe moved from one extreme to the other – replacing the sense of discrimination and alienation of German-speakers with a growing sense of disenfranchisement and alienation by Italian speakers. In fact, similar to the situation in Israel, defining who the minority is and who the majority is, changes according to the context used: while German-speakers are a tiny minority in the Italian context they are a decisive majority in the Bolzano Province. Similarly, while Jews are a decisive majority inside Israel they are a tiny minority in the Arab-Muslim Middle East.

The second important lesson derived from the definition of the model as "a dynamic autonomy". In the Israeli reality there is often the tendency to look for "final" or "permanent" solutions and, witnessing the still-prevailing tensions between the groups living in South Tyrol, the question of the stability and sustainability of this model was raised. However, we have later seen that the model is defined as being "a work in progress", which allows it to be more flexible and fit itself with the changing times. Such "constructive ambiguity", which for Israelis is often seen as threatening stability, in fact allows the model to better withstand the many and changing challenges it has to face.

The third issue that was raised is the regional and international context of the model – i.e. its relationship with the Italian nation state, with Austria and with the European Union in general. One aspect of this issue is that the role that Austria played in the resolution of the conflict over South Tyrol was seen as important and extremely relevant, as the ties between the Arab-Palestinian community inside Israel and the future Palestinian state are also a key factor in the resolution of the Middle East conflict. A second aspect was raised when our hosts explained that, in the context of the EU, the importance of the nation-state has been gradually declining over the past decades. Many of the people we met with felt more "South Tyrolean" than "Italians" or "German/Italian speakers" and had no problem living with a multiple, somewhat diffuse, identity. This was perceived as a sharp contrast to the Israeli reality in which nationality and ethnicity are still central issues. Maybe the conclusion here is that ethnic identity has to first be achieved and secured – in order for it to later become more diffuse and marginal.

In sum – many of the participants believed that what we have witnessed should be understood as an end result of a 60-year process (which is still ongoing) and not as a "take-it-or-leave-it", fixed model. The situation in Israel – of internal discrimination, negation of group rights, regional conflict, calls for secession and mutual mistrust – is much more similar to South Tyrol in the 40s and 50s than it is to the current reality. The success of the South Tyrol model – in terms of economic welfare, high standard of living and the ability of the various ethnic (or language) groups to peacefully coexist side-by-side has impressed us tremendously. Still, participants were left with at least as many questions as answers, and decided to continue the learning process - utilizing the good contacts created with the people of South Tyrol and with CIPMO - in order to examine which components of this model would be relevant to implement in the Israeli reality.