

Promoting Regional Cooperation in S&T



AN INTERVIEW WITH:

Bob Lapidot

Bob Lapidot is Head of the Division of International Relations of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

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Bob, how and why is the Academy involved in regional S&T cooperation?

LAPIDOT: *Based on its highly successful program in the People's Republic of China, the Israel Academy felt that scientific cooperation could and should play an important role in normalizing relations between the countries of our own region. Since 1994, the Academy has been deeply involved in the meetings of the Scientific Academies of the Middle East Region (SAMER), initiated by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS), and related activities (The FORUM, Winter 1997). We felt that a lot of regional S&T cooperation was going on unnoticed and unreported.*

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What have you done so far to change that?

LAPIDOT: *For one thing, we commissioned a comprehensive survey of Arab-Israeli cooperation in basic research during 1995-99, at both academic and nonacademic institutions throughout our region. The report, submitted just last month (January 2000), was authored by Paul Scham, a researcher at the Truman Institute for Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. On January 25, 2000, Prof. Jacob Ziv, the President of the Israel Academy, presented these results and related materials to a special meeting of the Knesset Commission on S&T. This session on Regional S&T Cooperation was also attended by Israel's Minister for Regional Cooperation, Shimon Peres. People seemed impressed by the actual size and scope of such cooperation.*

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Can you give us some sample figures?

LAPIDOT: *Sure. Of the 217 projects reported, about 60% involved Israeli S&T cooperation with Palestinian (PNA) partners, 16% involved Egyptian partners, 14% involved Jordanian partners and 6% involved Moroccan partners. About 22% of the projects were in Social Science Research, Environmental and Water Research, Agricultural and Veterinary Research, and Medical Research (each). Only about 4% were in such exact sciences as Physics. The European Union supported 54% of the projects; the U.S., 24%; Israel, 19%. However, the large U.S. Middle-East Regional Cooperation (MERC) projects shift these figures, in dollar terms, sharply towards U.S. funders and Israel-Egyptian cooperation.*

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Were there any unexpected results?

LAPIDOT: *Yes. Arab countries seemed reluctant to cooperate jointly with Israel, preferring bilateral projects. Projects involving a strongly interested, high-ranking Arab official able to provide political support were also more successful. Personal social relations between the Israeli and Arab participants were also usually surprisingly positive. Conversely, the number of Israeli Arabs participating in such research was surprisingly few.*

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What's next?

LAPIDOT: *We would like to use our information to help identify opportunities and potential donors for future regional S&T projects. Meanwhile, we are gearing up for three SAMER-inspired regional S&T workshops — on Micronutrient Deficiencies (Ramallah), Water Research (Amman) and Biodiversity (Sde Boker) — all to be held this year. We are also now distributing the results of our recent joint SAMER report on Water for the Future, published by the NAS in 1999. The Academy is a particularly useful locus for such joint activities.*