

German and European Policies Concerning the Middle East¹

Thank you very much for the invitation to this conference. It is a great pleasure for me to be with you. I am a reader, a lecturer, and an observer of German and European policies with respect to the Middle East as a whole and to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular for forty years. During the last years I have been actively supporting the ideas of the Geneva Accord in the German political and educational arenas. Palestinian and Israeli personalities prepared this virtual peace treaty without the material intervention of foreign states. This was to my mind one of the major advantages in comparison to the Roadmap. I could not have continued my work without keeping alive a minimum of political hopefulness.

I believe that Jews and Arabs in this country are natural allies living under the umbrella of a geographic, historical, and cultural neighbourhood. Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians are able to master their destiny of their own. Forces and powers from outside, states and civil society groups can share their endeavours in one way or another to support the voices of peace and reconciliation in the Middle East. But they cannot decide about what is good for them.

In my short presentation I would like to draw your attention to some major problems by reviewing German and European policies with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I am going to focus my remarks on three aspects:

1. official policies,

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2. public discourses in relation to government decisions and non-decisions, and

3. some ideas for possible options.

I.

All European governments have consistently underscored their active desire to prop up peace between the Israeli and the Palestinian societies. Thanks to continuous reports from their embassies, consulates, and from NGO's working in this country, they are well-informed about the facts on the ground. When we look into official declarations we find clear-cut disapproval of the Israeli settlement project, land grabbing, and human rights violations. But in the same documents we register sharp condemnation of Palestinian acts of violence and terrorism. When we take into account both aspects of those European statements the impression is not unreasonable that the bulk of Israeli policy in the territories is to a great extent viewed as a justified reaction to Palestinian misdeeds.

In other words: There is some sort of evasive maneuvering on the sidelines instead of endorsing the crucial issues. Alongside the Roadmap of the Quartet and its related 14 reservations of the Sharon government, the differentiation between "illegal outposts" and settlements is by and large maintained, adopting the Israeli version that the settlement project is authorized. Those estimations seem to defend an Israeli interpretation which was "invented" by Yehuda Z. Blum – then lecturer on International Law at the Hebrew University – with his exposition "The Missing Reversioner: Reflections on the Status of Judea and Samaria" in the „Israel Law Review“ of 1968. Blum insisted that no state can present a legal offer to rule Judea and Samaria that is equal to that of Israel and that those territories are at least disputed and their status can only be determined through negotiations. Blum's contentions were joined especially by Meir Shamgar, Shabtai Rosenne, and Yoram Dinstein. In March 2008 not less than 55 percent of the Jewish public defined the West Bank as "liberated territory."

Furthermore, reviewing the difficulties of the 27 member states to develop a joint foreign policy, we notice a tacit Europe acknowledgement when Israel dismisses offers to help achieve agreements between Israel and the

Palestinians beyond providing technical, economic, and financial assistance. The Europeans are invited to improve Palestinian living conditions by considerable monetary transfers for salaries of civil servants and for humanitarian and infrastructural ventures. But channelling generous grants alone – encouraged by the hyper-theoretical “New Middle East” of Shimon Peres – cannot serve as a substitute for the political implementation of diplomatic objectives.

To my regret after Annapolis the Berlin conference of June 2008 returned to that course of palliatives, and the Old Continent does not adopt the warning of Zeev Jabotinsky in 1924 that no Arab in Palestine will sell his national desires for a slice of bread and butter. So, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s biting judgement of the 1990s:

“It does not make a difference what you Germans do, it is of no importance”,

can be applied to the European Union as a whole, although its member states could take recourse to Rabin’s second sentence that

“the Palestinians were not in the past, and are not today, a threat to the existence of the state of Israel.”

Therefore, the main role of the European Union is restricted to polished declarations, to demonstrations of political goodwill and to messenger services between the adversaries. Not by chance the participants of the international gathering “A Peace within a Year” in January 2008 in Herzliya, which I had the privilege to attend, refrained completely from mentioning Europe as a political player in the Middle East.

II.

I continue with some remarks about the relations between German and European policy and public opinion:

First, I must pay tribute to Avraham Burg’s recent complaints that discussions in Israel about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are virtually impossible to be carried out with reason, patience, self-control, and restraint. The same experience can be applied at least to Western Europe.

Second, the disproportions between the official decision-makers and the pressures to influence them are obvious – and those attempts are principally legitimate. But the gap between them has generated a politicized subculture with a dangerous climate and rather aggressive tempers in public discourses – debates, open letters, petitions, solidarity campaigns, seminars, email exchanges – with a tendency that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be solved by vigorous interferences from outside. Approaches like those go together with appeals to boycott Israeli institutions and with demands addressed to the EU governments, to reject Israel's participation in European Community programs. Articles of Amira Hass and Gideon Levy about the Israeli policy in the Palestinian territories are regularly translated in Germany, but their critical commentaries about Hamas are consistently neglected.

“Zionism” has widely become a term of revulsion and disgust. In Germany the enthusiastic reception of Ilan Pappé's “Ethnic Cleansing” is a remarkable example – because he is understood to have mixed up historical assessments and political passions and because he left the impression that behind his enquiries he questions the legitimacy of the state of Israel. On the other side Hamas is widely regarded as the only legitimate and valuable source of resistance.

Additionally, in private conversations high-ranking officials do not conceal anymore their uneasiness about Israeli policy. The former success of Israeli messengers and institutions to utilize anxieties of being charged with deep-rooted anti-Jewish prejudices stopped working and is vanishing gradually. Nevertheless, official confidence-building activities for the benefit of Palestinians and Israelis are seldom on the agenda. U.S. pretensions of undisputed leadership in the Middle East remain unaffected.

III.

Now the European governments are waiting for President-elect Barack Obama. Hopefully Zbigniew Brzezinski's proposal to close ranks in the relationship between Europe and the U.S. is going to bear fruit. In an article Brzezinski wrote:

“There won't be a European role until Europe—by which I mean primarily the political leadership of Great Britain, Germany, and France, maybe supported on the margins by Spain, Italy, and Poland—comes to us and

says, *'This is our European policy. We are your allies. We are willing to work with you, but policy is shared, and responsibilities are shared.'*"

The forthcoming appointment of Daniel C. Kurtzer as special Mideast envoy to President Obama would, I believe, be a highly estimated decision, since in his book (together with Scott B. Lasansky) "Negotiating Arab Israeli Peace" (2008) Kurtzer has summarized the diplomatic shortcomings and failures of the past and has outlined ten lessons and recommendations for future administrations. The pivotal question is how long it will take, until European governments establish a joint high-ranking team to stabilize systematically the momentum of Israeli-Palestinian final-solutions negotiations instead of focussing their efforts on declarations and dealing with piece-meal approaches and short-term assets or being satisfied to send foreign ministers, envoys and parliamentarians on one- or two-day visit to Jerusalem and Ramallah and hopefully one day to Gaza.

It leads nowhere to dispatch new fact-finding missions, to analyze, to observe, to evaluate, and to learn more about the facts on the ground and the views of the conflicting parties, since everybody is familiar with the core issues that have to be addressed, and the necessary expertise is available too. The timetable for a win-win game is pretty narrow. The joint European strategy curbing Russia in Georgia last summer could be taken as a model. Economic, financial and other means of material assistance and cooperation should be conditional on the political progress of the parties. With regard to my country it is not enough or sufficient anymore to repeat "the special historical responsibility of Germany for the existence of Israel" and to whip to death the abstract formula of the *"vision of two states in secure borders and in peace"*. A sovereign state of Palestine can become a stabilizing partner against manifold other threats in the region.

Finally, with all due respect I would like to state a warning here in East Jerusalem: the international community will not support the Palestinians forever, if and when they do not agree upon a reconciliation process between themselves and, if they want, under the surveillance of their Arab brothers. Otherwise, the international community will discontinue step by step from encouraging the peace process by means at their disposal.
