

The EU under German Presidency: Middle East Policy – Paper for the Herzliya Conference, 22 January 2007 –

**by Dr. Rolf Mützenich, Member of the “Foreign Relations Committee”
of the Deutsche Bundestag**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for the invitation to this outstanding conference. I consider it a great honour to also be given the opportunity to speak here today. The German Presidency of the European Council is currently at the heart of our political work. I would therefore like to talk about my views on the tasks facing us in the Middle East.

Germany has become an important player in this region. Germany's Minister for Foreign Affairs visited the region six times during and after the war between Israel and Hezbollah. He listened, put forward ideas, and – when requested – carried messages. In other words: we are engaging with the region and intend to continue to do so in future. Perhaps even to a greater degree than many policy-makers in Berlin would prefer. At the same time, Germany has a military presence in the region for the first time.

What significance does the German Presidency of the European Council have in terms of European policy towards the Middle East? I consider the following points to be important:

1. Israel's right to exist in recognised borders is not a matter of debate. We will contradict anyone who takes a different view. Furthermore, we are committed to the security of Israel and its people. Security is not a one-sided condition, however. In Europe, we had to learn that in the long term only security for all sides can create a durable system. Military strength is one side of the coin, the establishment of structures for peace is the other.
2. This leads me to conclude that the consideration of Palestinian interests is a prerequisite for the safeguarding of the existence of Israel and its people over the long term. The creation of a Palestinian state as Israel's neighbour can only succeed if both sides enjoy security. Ehud Olmert, the Prime Minister of Israel, emphasised in his speech on November 27 his willingness to make substantial concessions to the Palestinian side. Further steps must now follow. This is something we wish to support.
3. Therefore it is imperative that we rethink our approach towards financial support for Palestine. We too are responsible for the current state within the Palestinian regions. Nevertheless the Palestinian groups have to be willing to compromise. A government of national union could be able to alter foreign relations, as well as internal affairs. We could differentiate between a government that works on the basis of existing treaties, and political groups of people, who peacefully, persistently and cautiously change their relationship with Israel. I think that refraining from violence is the fundamental prerequisite. Only then will relationships be able to develop – internally and externally.
4. We therefore want to revive the Middle East Quartet. In this context, it is crucial that the USA play a constructive role in the Middle East peace

process again. The Baker Report gives grounds for hope, although I believe its significance should also not be overestimated. However, the fact that Washington is evidently beginning to rediscover the concepts and instruments of "Old Europe" is a hopeful sign. Regarding the revival of the Quartet, an expansion of the number of participants to include in particular China, as a permanent member of the Security Council, and the Arab League, is also being considered. It would furthermore be helpful to designate an official representative for the Quartet.

5. A certain division of labour can already be observed today in Germany's policy towards the Middle East. Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs Steinmeier offers his services in the region as a messenger and mediator, while Chancellor Merkel concentrates on the dialogue with the USA and Russia and the revival of the Middle East Quartet. But it is also completely clear that even the large, powerful United States of America is not in a position, as a third party, to impose peace by itself. The prerequisite for peace remains the willingness of the parties to the conflict to embrace it.
6. If, during the German Presidency,- the EU should not succeed in launching a new political process in the Middle East, a new outbreak of violence is likely. Whether such a war could be contained within the immediate area is questionable. That is another reason why we are playing an active role. I believe it would be wrong, however, to think only in terms of grand plans. We should also take small steps in the coming months. This includes border management, bringing together various players, and the development of civilian structures in the Autonomous Territories. In short: step-by-step confidence-building.
7. Regarding Syria: since the withdrawal of its armed forces, Damascus can no longer actively shape conditions in Lebanon as it wishes. It can destabilise the situation in Lebanon via its allies there, however. The situation regarding its ability to influence conditions among the Palestinians is similar. There are a number of reasons to believe that a resumption of negotiations on the Golan Heights and other common interests may cause Syria to take a constructive approach. My request would be: take President Assad at his word. Test the sincerity of his offer of talks.
8. Only a political process that is acceptable to all involved will reduce the risk of violent confrontation. Such a process need not – and must not – deal with all of the problems in the Middle East. The core of the issue concerns Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon and Syria. The future of Iraq and the nuclear dispute with Iran do not belong on the agenda of such a process. Those issues must be dealt with by separate regional or international approaches. The Middle East Quartet (the USA, the EU, the United Nations and Russia) will have to play an important role in the context of the political process, because Israel's security, Palestinian statehood, Lebanon's sovereignty and Syria's territorial integrity need not be incompatible.
9. Progress towards resolving the Middle East conflict would, in my view, also make a vital contribution to achieving regional stability, combating terrorism effectively and ensuring effective monitoring and disarmament of weapons of mass destruction.

10. In the long term, Israel will, despite its military strength, only achieve security if it reaches an understanding with its neighbours. If these neighbours also subscribe to the values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, this will be correspondingly easier and possible to a greater extent.

11. The lessons from Germany's and Europe's experiences during the Cold War era are: that talks across ideological divides are possible and necessary, that isolating opponents does not solve conflicts, and that enmity can be overcome in regional security structures. It is my firm conviction that this is a possible path for the Middle East, too.

Finally, I would like to warn against having too high expectations of the German Presidency. Germany can undoubtedly play an active role, launch initiatives and hold talks with the players involved. But the German Presidency will not be able to solve the Middle East conflict, one of the oldest and most complicated conflicts in the world. There is no way around the fact that viable solutions must ultimately be negotiated by the parties to the conflict, in the knowledge that they have no alternative to the peace process.

Thank you for your attention. I am looking forward to an interesting and fruitful discussion.

www.reiner-bernstein.de

www.genfer-initiative.de