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The Middle East in Berlin
Remarks on and documentation of the meeting of the Committee of
Foreign Affairs, April 6, 2011

On 6 April 2011, the Committee of Foreign Affairs of the German Bundestag held a public hearing on the upheavals in the Arab world. Invited to the hearing were Dr. Mustafa Barghouthi, Palestinian presidential candidate in 2005 and leader of the “Palestinian National Initiative”; Dr. Rudolph Chimelli, Middle East specialist of the “Sueddeutsche Zeitung”; Prof. Dr. Gudrun Krämer, Professor of Islamic Studies at the Free University of Berlin; Prof. Dr. Volker Perthes, Director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin; and Dr. Hardy Ostry, Head of the Regional Office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Amman. At the invitation of Wolfgang Gehrcke, Member of the Bundestag (The Left Party), I had prepared my considerations about the connection between the Arab disturbances and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the members of the Committee. My assessments and my response to the questionnaire of the Bundestag are enclosed below. In January 2011 I had the privilege to accompany Mr. Gehrcke as a political adviser on his trip to Cairo, Damascus, Amman, Tel Aviv / Jerusalem and Ramallah.

Just a few weeks ago the Secretary General of the League of Arab States, Amr Moussa, lamented that “the Arab soul is broken by poverty, unemployment and general recession.” But virtually overnight the peoples’ rage and despair have turned against their autocrats and tyrants. Whereas the political West promptly dropped Muammar Qaddafi, it took weeks to distance itself from Hosni Mubarak, and Bashar Assad profits from the same restraint to this day. These two potentates were and are

seen as strategic stabilisers in a region of the world marked by unrest. The stance towards Damascus is currently limited to the recommendation “political reforms”.

Israeli components

Had one ventured to hope that the Federal Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel would follow up her visit to Israel in February 2011 with a purposeful political pronouncement here in Europe, namely that overcoming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could wait no longer, Dr. Merkel’s remarks at the joint press conference with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 6 April in Berlin gave cause to rediscover the old familiar ground of non-committal pragmatism: Starting with her greeting, Mrs. Merkel did not hesitate to extend a “warm welcome here in the Chancellery” to her guest from Jerusalem.

Under the headline “The Telephone Call”, speculation in the Israeli press had alternated between a reconciliatory meeting of the two heads of government and a continuation of the full-blown row following Berlin’s affirmative vote in criticism of settlement activity in the UN Security Council on 18 February. Ultimately Mrs. Merkel, in Mr. Netanyahu’s presence, expressly ruled out German acknowledgement of the proclamation of the State of Palestine planned for the fall. Instead, the Federal Government will continue to cling to the concept of negotiations aimed at a two-state solution along the 1967 ceasefire line without being able to explain how and within what time frame this goal has to be achieved—unfortunately awaiting once again the results of the efforts of the Administration in Washington as suggested in the statement of the EU Foreign Ministers of 22 February. But the Administration has limited itself to expressing its “deep concern” about the settlement building system. Mrs. Merkel’s reference to Germany’s voting behaviour in New York hence should not be allowed to be interpreted as an after-the-fact agreement with the US veto.

In any case, Mr. Netanyahu could note with evident delight that he knew hardly any (other) leading politician who had shown greater support for (Israel’s) security than the Federal Chancellor. The settlements were no real, true obstacle to a solution, Mr. Netanyahu said, but he nevertheless linked their cessation to the issue of mutual

recognition, the issue of refugees, the issue of borders and the issue of security—thus implicitly denying that his notions of security and the other areas of conflict were of equal importance.

Precarious satisfaction

After several topical debates on the Middle East conflict in the plenary of the Bundestag, scheduled debates on Tunisia and Egypt and a policy statement by the Federal Foreign Minister on “the watershed events in the Arab world” (followed by a wide-ranging discussion among the factions of the Parliament) between June 2010 and March 2011, the Committee on Foreign Affairs was well advised to correct its own uncertainties of the events between Morocco and Syria by inviting experts to be heard. And in fact, the presentations and subsequent question-and-answer session yielded a wealth of additional information and impressions, considerably greater awareness of linkages and initial pointers for political action.

Not unexpectedly, the positions of the Members of the Bundestag in the Committee were not far apart. For the spokespersons were clearly in agreement in their approval of Germany’s abstention during the vote on Resolution 1973 in the UN Security Council on 29 March due to the military components, especially since it had been foreseeable that deployment of Western combat troops would be imminent if Qaddafi’s units, notwithstanding all international efforts to reach a ceasefire, continued to battle the politically fractured and poorly organized opposition. Minor differences arose at most in the assessment of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its stance on democratic participation and in regard to the implications of the events in Syria and the role of Turkey as a regional power. The central importance of the relationship between Israel’s Jewish and Arab citizens for a two-state solution was lost in the shuffle. Ahmadinejad’s Iran was to my surprise hardly worth mentioning. The fact that under the constitution reform of 19 March Egyptian women were to continue to wait for equality was voiced only in one interjection.

At the end of the question-and-answer sessions, Committee Chairman Ruprecht Polenz could note with satisfaction the basic agreement among the participants that

the German parliament and the Federal Government should accord the Arab world considerably more attention. As one might add here, Israelis and Palestinians are incapable of resolving the conflict on their own. The last word has certainly not been had in Syria, nor in Cairo either, for that matter: Public outrage at the contradictory policies of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces continues.

Western misconceptions

Due to the concentration on the Arab part of the Middle East, Mustafa Barghouti did not have an easy time. For a long time now, differences in the assessment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have hardly been detectable across the Bundestag—let alone some differences in the assessment of the existential threat to the state of Israel. Thus far, however, Berlin has shied away from tangible consequences.

The fact that governments in Jerusalem regularly take the security of their country into their own hands has been confirmed yet again: According to the latest press reports, military expenditures in the 2011 fiscal year will total 53.4 billion new shekels (approximately 10.9 billion euros), just under 20 percent of the national budget—not including personnel and pension expenditures, rehabilitation measures for wounded soldiers, the call-up of reserves, expenses for the foreign intelligence agency “Mossad” and the military counter-intelligence agency “Shavak”, and the construction and maintenance of military infrastructure. The stenographic reports of the Bundestag do not contain a single word on the intrinsic right to security for which the Palestinian population in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem and in the Gaza Strip is entitled since decades.

Without again dealing with the daily injustice and serious restrictions, Dr. Barghouti reiterated his concern that due to the Western-aided consolidation of the Palestinian Authority, the West Bank seems to be on the verge of degenerating into a police state and that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should no longer be seen through the Israeli-American prism. In response to the call for a two-state solution, Dr. Barghouti left no room for doubt: “No compromise to compromise!” At the same time, he distanced himself from the Western fear of change in the Arab world and stressed

that as an occupying power Israel hardly deserved the privilege of being appreciated as a democracy.

Was it a political sense of shame at Germany's co-responsibility that led the members of the Committee to refrain from responding to both accusations and thus giving the impression that they accepted them? Wouldn't at least a discussion of the potential interaction schemes between events in the Arab neighbourhood and feedbacks within the Palestinian population have been worth while, given that any debate about the reactions within the Israeli population was to be omitted?

German hesitations

The fact that Dr. Barghouthi referred to his earlier meeting with Lady Catherine Ashton at the beginning of his brief presentation in Berlin gives cause for hope that the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy did not exercise such restraint. It would be inappropriate for the very fact alone that the international political community is still incapable of arriving at a decision as about whom it means when speaking of "Israel"—hopefully not Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman who was nevertheless accorded the honour by the Bavarian Prime Minister Horst Seehofer and Lord Mayor Christian Ude in Munich on 8 April to celebrate the inauguration of the new Israeli Consulate General and who warned the Europeans against seeking contact with Hamas. To my mind the Islamic Resistance Movement provides him with the desired excuse to mistrust any Palestinian leadership on principle.

"The occupation is eating away at Israel's democracy," the Director General of the Geneva Initiative, Gadi Baltiansky, explained to us in January 2011 and drew our attention to the dangers of political evasiveness. His admonition should be taken dead seriously in Berlin and in Brussels in order that European diplomacy does not again become bogged down in senseless endeavours to reach a solution and in order that Europe does not continue to tighten the wrong screws. "Save our democracy!" chanted the 15,000 participants at the large peace demonstration in Tel

Aviv in mid-January. In Berlin, Dr. Barghouthi saw the same danger for his polity, although its root causes are fundamentally different from those in Israel.

Europe's struggle for peace in the Middle East is no extraordinary demonstration of goodwill towards the parties embroiled in the dispute there, but is instead in its own interest. The end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not necessarily bring an end to the political upheavals in the Arab world, as some self-proclaimed experts would like us to believe. But a national settlement between Israelis and Palestinians would deprive every Arab government of the excuse to put off or even shelve the resolution of the serious domestic problems on the agenda.

Reiner Bernstein:

Replies to the cross-party list of questions for the meeting of the Committee of Foreign Affairs on April 6, 2011

My remarks are concentrated on Israeli politics and society in the regional context

1. What is the current situation in the region and what scenarios are emerging?

The upheavals in the Arab region have a direct impact on relations with Israel. If Israeli policy continues to deny the Palestinians national sovereignty and independent viability, Israel's isolation in the region will increase—and hence its dependence on the USA and Europe as well. The “Arab Spring” has heightened the urgency of peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

2. Where is Israel's democracy movement headed?

The democracy movement is in decline. All the data—impairment of the separation of powers, primacy of the military, civic education of young people, control of social life by the religious Orthodoxy, the lawless realm of the settlers' movement –

threaten Israel's claim to be a beacon of democracy and the rule of law in the region. Former Attorney General Yehudit Karp has again complained to the Minister of Justice that judicial decisions are being undermined or ignored by state authorities.

The work of international aid organisations, including that of the German political foundations, is meanwhile threatened by laws that seek to politically control it on the pretext that it constitutes inadmissible interference in internal affairs. Whether and how the Federal Government will react to such designs is not known, beyond the dilatory response to a minor interpellation by Member of the Bundestag Petra Pau of April 20, 2010.

3. What can be done from outside to promote democratic processes in Israel?

The greatest challenge lies in liberating the Jewish population from its psychosis of eternal victimhood and ensuing readiness to use force. Additional arms deliveries will further fuel the cycle of escalating outrage and agitation.

Contrary to the commitment in the 1948 declaration of independence, and contrary to recommendations, the Arab-Palestinian inhabitants of Israel have been relegated to the status of second-class citizens. In response, representatives of this part of the population are seeking to enforce their recognition as a national minority: The dynamite has turned inward – and is aimed at the integrity of the state. The demand of the majority society to be accepted as a Jewish and at the same time democratic state has further exacerbated the situation. It is not least the quality of relations between Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens which will determine the prospects for a peaceful future for the two peoples as a whole.

4. What role does Jewish theology play in Israeli politics, taking moderate and extremist forces into consideration?

One of the fundamental misconceptions of political Zionism was the desire to build a secular polity in Palestine and thereby push the traditions of Rabbinic Judaism to the

periphery. But already in the Israeli declaration of independence, which focused on the new beginning after centuries of exile, religious elements clearly came to the fore. With two brief interruptions, religious parties have always sat at the Cabinet table. An exalted interpretation of religious texts prevailed after the June war. Even the Labour Party wrote in its 1977 election platform that “the right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel is eternal” and that “in Judea and Samaria” there could be only Jewish sovereignty.

In the meantime such visions have finished the “long march through the institutions” and have entered into a symbiotic relationship with extremist policy that has been termed as “Yeshiva Nationalism” (Yoram Hazony). Its influence on government actions is enormous and distinguishes between political peace—peace made by men—and peace made by God. Thus, after the murder of five members of the Fogel family in the settlement Itamar (near Nablus) in mid-March 2011 the officiating rabbi there eulogised the death of the 11 year-old religious boy as the fulfilment of divine prophecy. The Jewish Enlightenment, an analogous fruit of the European 18th and 19th centuries, is in full retreat.

5. What role do denominational aspects play?

The number of Christians and the group “Jews for Jesus” are growing among the immigrants from the successor states of the Soviet Union, above all through the work of U.S. missionary societies. Islamist pressure on Palestinian Christians has led to some acts of violence in Nazareth and in Bethlehem. In political terms the Palestinian Christians do not differ from the Muslim majority in their national aspirations.

6. What instruments should Germany and the European Union utilize or develop to support economic and social development in Israel and Palestine?

The Palestinian leadership in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip cannot circumvent the necessity of substantial adjustments and reforms: an end to internal

rivalries; free elections with the aim of a democratically legitimized government; judicial reforms; elimination of clientelism and corruption; freedom of the press and the unimpeded exchange of ideas. In the West Bank, the training and professionalisation of the security services—in dependence upon the “US Security Coordinator” (USCC) and the “European Police Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support” (EUPOL COPPS)—has exacerbated the trend towards authoritarianism. Without serious improvements of the root causes, the flaws and shortcomings, the proclamation of Palestine will prove to be some sort of escapism because it will have capitulated in advance of the demands for “freedom, justice and equality” (Prime Minister Salam Fayyad). Recently, two Palestinian scholars have castigated the economic neoliberalism that masquerades as national liberation.

Should the two-state solution fail once and for all, the international community of nations will be confronted with the alternatives “binational state”, “unitary state”, or a third version under which the majority of Israelis and Palestinians would live in two states, but could claim a right of residence with dual citizenship between the Mediterranean and the Jordan.

7. What do the developments in the Arab world portend for the peace process and Israel's security?

All the international agreements, offers and negotiations constituting the so-called peace process have failed to eliminate the structural asymmetry to the detriment of the Palestinians. Without paying attention to its economic, social and humanitarian components, “security” is being defined in Israel solely in military and strategic categories. If the rule of law and democracy gain the upper hand in Israel's Arab surroundings, pressure will mount on the Israeli political sector to address the issue of integration in the Middle East. This in Israel's eyes the undesirable domino effect would impair its claim to sovereignty over the Palestinian territories.