

## **Estranged friends? A view on Israel from Western Europe**

**By Carlo Strenger, „Haaretz“ 22.02.2012**

*Am 16./27. Februar 2012 fand in Berlin eine Konferenz der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung mit dem Titel „Fremde Freunde? Die israelische und deutsche Sicht auf Staat, Nation, Gewalt. Ein Vergleich“ statt. Zu ihr war unter anderen der an der Universität Tel Aviv lehrende Psychoanalytiker Carlo Strenger eingeladen, der regelmäßig für die Tageszeitung „Haaretz“ schreibt.*

*In seinem Beitrag für das Blatt macht Strenger drei Problemfelder aus, die für die deutsche und westliche Entfremdung gegenüber Israel sorgen: die nationalistische Rhetorik, gipfelnd in der Behauptung vom ewigen jüdischen Recht auf das ganze Land Israel; der Weg Israels in die Ethnokratie, die zwischen den Rechten der Juden und denen der Nichtjuden unterscheidet; und der Eingang der Religion in die israelische Politik, die für ihren verhängnisvollen Einfluss auf die Kolonisierung der Westbank sorgt.*

*Für ihn, Strenger, habe die Konferenz die Frage „Quo vadis, Israel?“ geschärft. Die Zukunft einer deutsch-israelischen Freundschaft werde durch die Institutionen der Zivilgesellschaft genährt: „Für mich wie für viele in Israel, für die die Ideale der Freiheit, der Menschenrechte und der Gleichbehandlung zentrale Werte sind, ist die Freundschaft mit Israel im Besonderen und mit Europa im Allgemeinen nicht rein instrumentell: Sie reflektiert die Ideale, die wir mit einem Kontinent teilen, der gewichtige Lektionen aus seiner tragischen Geschichte gelernt hat.“*

AMSTERDAM - Last week I spent a few days in Berlin, primarily for a conference entitled: "Estranged Friends? Israeli and German Perceptions of State, Nation, Force" organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, a German foreign policy organizations allied with the left-leaning Green party.

I have met with members of the Green party and of the Heinrich Böll Foundation quite often, and I can say beyond doubt that many of its members are deeply engaged with and closely connected to Israel. Quite a number of them are true friends of, feel connected to and care for Israel. They know its political and social structure well, and are well informed about current affairs in Israel.

Germany's relation to Israel has always been complex; overshadowed by the tragedy and horrors of the Holocaust. Support for Israel is a fixture of German politics, and Chancellor Merkel has gone as far to say that one of the Federal Republic's *raison d'être* is its commitment to Israel's existential security.

It therefore took some courage for the Böll Foundation to formulate the conference's guiding question: do Israel and Germany still share a true friendship, or has the estrangement become the dominant trait?

Israel was represented by a number of eloquent spokespeople, among them Shimon Stein, who served as Israel's ambassador to Germany from 2001 to 2007. Stein made it clear that he no longer represents Israel's government and that he chose early retirement from the Foreign Service due to difficulties of representing Israel's current government.

Stein's position was particularly interesting, because he is, by no means, a starry-eyed idealist: he belongs to the realist school in international relations that understands relations between countries as a function of national interests. For him, the notion of friendship between nations is rather vague, and he prefers looking at commonalities of interest.

But here, exactly was one of the themes that resurfaced, time and again. Is there, at this point, a commonality of interest between Germany and Israel, or is Israel gradually turning into a liability for its supposedly Western friends? After all for these, the tense relations with the Islamic world are a source of great concern; partially because of their dependence on Arab oil, but also because of their preoccupation with the evolving relations with their Muslim minorities. In this respect, Germany's friendship with Israel is indeed about to turn into more of a problem for its long-term interests.

By and large I saw remarkable sympathy and understanding for Israel's genuine concerns, not only with respect to the possibility of a nuclear Iran. Ralph Fuecks, co-Chair of the Böll Foundation, repeatedly quoted the Mufti's recent statement that Jews were the descendants of apes and pigs to show that incitement against Israel is by no means a matter of the past.

There are three major points on which Israel is clearly moving away from the West, as represented by Germany. One is the rise of nationalist rhetoric and the tendency of the ruling coalition to speak of Jews' eternal right to the greater land of Israel. German intellectuals and politicians are highly aware that German romanticism has been crucial in developing this kind of rhetoric in the nineteenth century with utterly disastrous consequences in the Nazi period, and they firmly reject such rhetoric wherever it is used.

The second, connected, issue is Israel's increasing movement towards ethnocracy: many of the Netanyahu coalition's legislative proposals differentiating between Jews and non-Jews run very deeply against the model of civic equality in the Free World.

The third is the great involvement of religion in Israeli politics in a variety of ways: most importantly in the fateful influence of the national-religious agenda on the colonization of the West Bank; through the fact that Israel's Rabbinate is a state agency; and the fact that it is even possible for ultra-Orthodox and national-religious groupings to demand that women be excluded from certain public functions like singing.

One of the participants, Prof. Michael Wolffsohn, a Jewish, Israeli-born historian at Munich University put the situation quite succinctly in one of the panels: he said that he can easily see how there could be an German-Meretz Friendship, but ever less a commonality between Germany and Israel. Because I'm quite sure that a number

of readers will say ‘ah, another leftist’, it might be worth pointing out that Wolffsohn, who has served in the IDF, is considered a political conservative. Wolffsohn’s statement highlights the growing chasm between Israel and Germany in particular, and the Free World in general. In terms of its core values, Israel has been moving away from the Free World, certainly during Netanyahu’s second tenure of the last three years.

I have, during these years, made great efforts to explain to European audiences what it is like to live under permanent existential threat, and I have tried to argue that at least certain aspects of Israel’s move to the right are the result of Israelis’ traumatization by the second Intifada and the shelling of southern Israel.

Nevertheless the conference, in my mind, has sharpened the question ‘quo vadis Israel?’ – where is the country headed? Are Israel’s growing nationalism and religiosity purely reactive, or do they reflect ethnic and religious identities that have become demographically more dominant? I think that, certainly in German’s elites, there is still a strong will to maintain and develop friendship with Israel. This is certainly not reciprocated by Lieberman who continues to show nothing but disdain for Europe; judging from his actions, Netanyahu and most of his coalition partners seem not to care either.

In the foreseeable future such friendship will have to be nourished through the institutions of civil society – as for example the Böll Foundation’s conference in Berlin. For me, as for many in Israel for whom the ideals of liberty, human rights and equality are core values, friendship with Germany in particular and Europe in general is not purely instrumental: it reflects the ideals we share with a continent that has drawn important lessons from its tragic history.