

Paris, June 27, 2010:
Reflections about the Discussions and Results of a Meeting
with Jewish Peace Activists:
Avoiding Mistakes – Outlining Opportunities

The first meeting in Paris, organized by architects of the “European Jewish Call for Reason”, presented on May 3, 2010 under the leadership of David Chemla and his French colleagues, took place with guests from Great Britain, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy. I myself had the privilege to join the meeting instead of my wife Judith Bernstein, being at the time in Israel. I am a lecturer in Jewish history and Middle Eastern affairs since more than forty years in institutions of higher education and universities in Germany. After the presentation of the Geneva Accord at the end of 2003 I tried to support in Germany this Israeli-Palestinian blueprint for a peace agreement between the two peoples, especially in discussions with members of Parliament – the Bundestag –, with media representatives, and in public conferences. Together with my wife, a Jerusalemite by birth, we are active in several German-Israeli-Palestinian round-tables and dialogue groups and offer our good services and expertise to political decision-makers.

Before I lay down some reflections about the Paris meeting I would like to detail in short two initial remarks with two general conclusions and at the end some proposals to extend some political common grounds:

I. German official points of departure concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The German-Israeli special relationship on the background of the Holocaust has remained and is a decisive issue in German politics. This predominance continues to be valid within the realm of diplomatic consultations with other major partners within the European Union, since the government and most of the lawmakers are convinced that the Israeli conflict with the Palestinians is more or less an outcome of the German crimes against the Jewish people since 1933. The last demonstration for this attitude was delivered in the parliamentary debates on June 10 and July 1 this year about the events around the Gaza flotilla.

In its approach to the Middle East German policy refrains from major initiatives which – according to its understanding – harm the political interests of any Israeli government. Berlin joins European ME declarations which criticize and even condemn the occupation of Palestinian lands. But it evades a comprehensive political program that supports the two-state solution and instead compensates the Palestinians since 1993 by extraordinary financial contributions for salaries and infrastructural projects.

By following this decisiveness Berlin ignores the necessity to explore new answers to new challenges:

- the growing asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians,
- Israeli endeavours to blur the Green Line according to the armistice agreement with Jordan in 1949,¹
- the rivalries between the PLO and Hamas which in a dangerous way weaken the Palestinian claim to national sovereignty,
- the utilization of diplomatic chances provided by the Arab Peace Initiative of March 2002 and the Geneva Accord of December 2003,
- the emergence of Jewish and Islamic fundamentalism in terms of religious hard-core principles as the result of totally failed political schemes on both sides to solve the conflict, and
- the public pressure in Arab countries reflecting the inefficiency of their governments to develop a unified position towards Israel and paying lip-services to the Palestinian national cause. Even Arab financial pledges remain short of implementation, not to speak about the mediation services of the Saudi and Egyptian governments to ease the PLO-Hamas confrontation.

¹ Cf. Daniella Peled: Delegitimising the Delegitimisers, in “Jewish Quarterly” Summer 2010, pp. 32–33, recalling the remark of Danny Ayalon, Deputy Foreign Minister, that Israel “does not distinguish between Jerusalem, Kiryat Tivon [north of Haifa] and Ariel. From our perspective, the boycott [of products from the settlements] is part of an ongoing incitement and delegitimation campaign by the Palestinian Authority against Israel.”

Nevertheless, it is more than obvious that the German foreign policy of today stands at a crossroad to re-evaluate its ME attitudes. These assessments are primarily not dependent on critical media reports and on German public opinion, but they are due to effects of detrimental peace activities in the region.

II. German public opinion with regard to the Middle East

An ever-widening gap has been developed between the government and public opinion. Neglecting demonstrations and vigils with agitated performances, large sections of the academic and intellectual elites nowadays turn a blind eye to Israel as the intended fulfilment of Jewish yearnings and Zionist claims. Either they have withdrawn from seriously dealing with what is going on in Israel or they advanced to attitudes of verbal aggressiveness and disdain. Members of the Jewish communities abstained for many years from a systematic engagement for a durable peace, since they believed that the Palestinian case would be destined to collapse in German perceptions of the Middle East conflict. But in the meantime the Palestinian community in Germany – about 70,000 people – with its German fellow-travellers and sympathizers have gained the public opinion leadership due to their ambitions to illustrate the suffering of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories.

Just a few people, to be counted with one hand, try to regenerate positions of balancing out those contradictory approaches. But it is clear that their position is constantly in danger, since the decisions of the Israeli policy deprive them of their credibility.

III. General conclusions

Notwithstanding official German and European policies, the two-state paradigm seems to be dead, since settlements and roads for the settlers and the military consume more than forty percent of the West Bank.²

² As of July 2010 Shaul Arieli who was responsible for drawing the maps for the "Geneva Accord" team shows that within the West Bank east of the separate wall

Withdrawals imply that a bloody and protracted civil war is at risk. Some Israelis strongly believe that such an outcome will be unavoidable to save the realisation of the two-state idea and feel exasperated concerning such a shocking development. The visit of German ministers in Yad vaShem to pay tribute to the victims of the Holocaust has obliterated their political agenda to talk *tachles* with the Israeli government. To summarize: The international community of states neglected the time factor to influence meaningful processes of conflicting interests.

What we have to deal with in case of the “JCall for Reason” and its demand to establish a sovereign Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel comes too late, and especially as long as “JCall” wants to ensure the survival of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Leaving aside the combination of “Jewish” and “democratic” which invites endless and fruitless debates and interpretations, the best formula to my mind is a double approach to political sovereignty and human rights, because Jewish Israelis and Arab Palestinians are by geography and history bound to live together unless they continue to select methods of eliminating each other.

Israel as the state of the Jewish people and all its citizens and Palestine as the state of the Palestinian people and all its citizens.

Such an outcome would require that in Israel the Arab citizens would be compensated for their losses since 1948 as well as the Palestinians in their state would be compensated for the expropriation they suffered by the establishment of the settlements in case that its inhabitants decide to stay in Palestine as loyal citizens³. To begin with, Jerusalem / Al-Quds should be developed into an experiment of model character. Without provisions for a peaceful coexistence in this city, political decision-makers can forget any sustainable progress. It is true that more than two thirds of the Jewish-Israeli public shore up to a two-state solution, but when it comes to the details (the Green Line of 1967, Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees), many plans and proposals remain in the drawers everywhere.

there are 74 settlements with 69,000 Jews, west of the separation wall 66 settlements with 412,000 Jews as well as 420,000 Palestinians under Israeli sovereignty.

³ Akram Baker: Palestinian settlers?, in “bitterlemons” June 21, 2010.

No matter how many signatures “JCall” may collect – the primary test to deliver its messages to their respective government and public is at least threefold:

Firstly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has developed its own dynamics beyond the European sources in the first half of the 20th century.

Secondly, the common denominator of “JCall” is its experiment to reach out to those people in the region who desperately try to overcome the political deadlock which invites extremists – including senior officials – to promote their own agenda. Last year President Barack Obama said that his administration has no chance to interfere into the peace process in a decisive way unless he is supported by the Israeli majority. The same request can be attributed to the Palestinian side.

Thirdly, governmental decisions at least in parts of Europe have emancipated from the significant influence of the “Jewish lobby.” In Germany the split about the occupation dynamic goes through Jewish communities. The “hard-core” leadership of today will be replaced by a younger generation of men and women who are no longer so much attached to Israel because they are not deeply involved in the collective and personal suffering during World War II. Like in the United States, as has been recently described in an essay in the “New York Review of Books”,⁴ they do not see Israeli policies in black and white colours. The German government does not look anymore to the politically conservative Jewish leadership in order to steer the boat of decision-making. With its reactions around the Gaza flotilla events in May 2010, the Israeli government overstretched considerable portions of patience in Berlin. It has turned out that Gaza is not only a humanitarian problem to be quietened by financial means.

⁴ Sara Roy: Reflections on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in U.S. Public Discourse: Legitimizing Dissent, in “Journal of Palestine Studies” # 154, XXXIX(Winter 2010)2, pp. 23 – 38, with all references.

Those trends we should not miss to address.

IV. Suggestions for finding more common grounds in the aftermath of our meeting in Paris

To my mind it is too late to confront in a constructive way an agitated non-Jewish public in Europe as long as the Israeli government does not turn the scales around completely. If and when the government in Jerusalem continues its course, any serious commitment of “JCall” to repair the Israeli image abroad will be doomed to failure. The next challenge lies ahead of us when the Israeli government refrains or prolongs the settlement moratorium past September 26. What are our foreign offices going to do when the settlement activities will start again in full speed?

Concerning the future of “JCall” my main point is to avoid new experiences of disappointments and mistakes. What is imminent first of all is to confront our ideas with local and regional realities. In recent meetings with leading members of Hezbollah and with representatives of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and in Jordan, my wife Judith and I had to swallow that the state of Israel should be eliminated. Without reducing the relevance of those threats and in reflection of their military powerlessness, the same sources came to the conclusion that at the end of the day they would leave it to the Palestinians themselves to come to terms with Israel on an equal footing. There is no doubt that the same applies to Hamas.

Beyond sending solidarity missions to Israel and to the occupied territories—since there are lots of very active internationals joining forces with peace groups on either side—, a comprehensive strategy is deficient to reach out to European governments to change their policies in order to save the two-states approach. What remains crucial is to lead the Palestinians via our governments as soon as possible into a position of political symmetry. A very striking example: On June 9, 2010 Mahmud Abbas was invited in Washington by an influential group of Jewish American leaders – including AIPAC representatives – to present Palestinian viewpoints of peace, and both sides seemed to be rather

satisfied after the meeting. In the words of Robert Wexler of the “S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace:”

“The point I think leaders took [home after the meeting] was that this was a unique opportunity to create a true, candid dialogue between parties, meaning the Palestinian leadership and the American Jewish community, where that dialogue in the past has been lacking.”⁵

I appreciate “JCall” as possibly one of the last major efforts of a European-Jewish voice to reason. But the decision to focus its attention primarily on the Jewish population in Israel reminds me of the decision of Peace Now after its establishment in autumn 1977 not to join forces with Arab-Palestinian compatriots, although there were many areas of considerable political accord—and with a party like Mapam and Hadash. Tamar Hermann, director of of the “Tami Steinmetz Center” at the University of Tel Aviv, relates in her contribution to a book about Israeli and Palestinian peace building groups that even “Gush Shalom” of Uri Avnery exerted “real reluctance ... having Arabs on board, which might have put in question these groups’ primary loyalty to the Israeli Jewish collective”.⁶

Such a judgement seems to be the outcome of an ethnic concept which contradicts not only (self-)assurances of belonging to the political Left—that defends at least in theory claims for international solidarity—, but stands in clear contradiction to the emphasis that “JCall” underscores “Jewish and universal values.” The recent large demonstration on June 25 in Silwan against the demolition of 22 houses there and against the deprivation of Palestinians from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah provided once more significant evidence that Israelis and Palestinians are the natural allies in this country for sustainable coexistence. That is why we should support both sides.

Nowadays “the enemies” in Jewish communities and in the Israeli establishment are in reality the moderates who look beyond ethnic bonds that stress the importance of the axioms of “Am Echad” and “national

⁵ Palestinians seek new partner: American Jews, in „Haaretz“ June 29, 2010.

⁶ Tamar Hermann: Civil Society and NGOs Building Peace in Israel, in Edy Kaufman, Walid Salem, and Juliette Verhoeven (eds.): Bridging the Divide. Peacebuilding in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Boulder (Col.) 2006, pp. 39–59.

consensus.” But at the end, the moderates with their reasonable und trustworthy performance will be recognized as cherished predecessors for peace. Some day Israelis will be grateful that Jews in the “Diaspora”⁷ raised the flag of conciliation and coexistence. David Grossman lamented recently the danger that Israel is on the way to suicide.⁸

⁷ Personally I have got some problems by generally using the phrase “Diaspora”—or even harsher “Galut” or “Gola”—, since it includes a pejorative attribute to Jews living outside Israel and ensures special rights of the “centre.” Many examples of interferences are well-known, especially in France since the government of Menachem Begin and in Germany in the 1990s when many thousand Jewish immigrants arrived from the former Soviet Union and the Israeli government intervened. In contradiction to the aims of political Zionism the majority of Jews decided on their own to live where they want. To me it seems that we have to recognize their priorities, all the more every part of Jewish life developed high standards in the fields of science, philosophy, theology, economy, humanities and so on. There should be a special relationship of symmetry to the advantage of all sides.

⁸ This thread of life. Paul Auster and David Grossman in conversation at the second international Writers Festival at Mishkenot in Jerusalem, in “Jewish Quarterly” Summer 2010, 8–10.