
Jerusalem, Wednesday, 30 May 2007

Speech by the President of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering to the Knesset

Yo-shevet Rosh Yeka-ra, (Madam Speaker,) Khav-rei Knesset Yeka-rim, (Honourable Members of Parliament,) Or-khim Mekhuba-dim, (Distinguished Guests,) Ka-vod Ga-dol Kha-laktem Li Be-hazmanatkhem Lasette Dvarim Lifney Knesset Zo. Bishmo Shel Haparlament Ha-Eiropi. (By extending this invitation to me, you have paid me the great honour of allowing me to address the Knesset. On behalf of the European Parliament I thank you for your warm hospitality.)

I am addressing you today as President of the European Parliament, a body which represents almost 500 million citizens from 27 Member States. However, I am also addressing you as a German, in other words in full awareness of the fact that I bear a special responsibility. Please allow me to address you in my mother tongue, the language of Moses Mendelssohn, Heinrich Heine and Theodor Herzl.

My speech today follows others given by former Presidents of the European Parliament. In previous years, Klaus Hänsch, Nicole Fontaine and Josep Borrell have stood where I am standing today. Like them, and like all my colleagues in the European Parliament, I unreservedly acknowledge Israel's lasting right to exist and Israel's right to live peacefully within secure borders among neighbours who recognise the State of Israel. As President of the European Parliament, as a man and a German European, I stand here as a friend whose feelings of sympathy and solidarity extend to all people in Israel.

Yesterday I visited Yad Vashem. Words fail me when I try to express the depth of the emotions which I experienced there. I feel those emotions again today as I speak to you, as you have allowed me to, in the language in which Lessing, in his work 'Nathan the Wise', that great work of literature of the German Enlightenment, related the 'parable of the three rings'. It is the most precious literary representation of tolerance between religions ever written in German.

We in Europe will never forget the terrible, unparalleled suffering inflicted on the Jewish people. That this suffering was inflicted in the name of my own people, the German people, fills me with shame. I pay homage to all the victims of the Shoah. I give thanks for the fact that Germans and Israelis can now make a fresh start. I give thanks for the trust which exists today between the European Union and Israel. It is a particularly warm relationship which links us as democracies and communities based on values and which is bringing us closer together as partners.

We respect Israel's heritage, which is part of our own European heritage. Whenever we deride our Jewish heritage in Europe, we deride our own values. Whenever we show contempt for Israel's contribution to our own civilisation, we show contempt for a valuable aspect of our own identity. Whenever we deny the incalculable suffering of the Jewish people, we deny the basis of our own dignity.

I share, therefore, your deep concern at the appalling speeches made by the President of Iran. The Iranians are a great people. The world expects their President to end his discourse of hate which poses a threat to world peace. As a German and a European, I say: anyone who denies the Holocaust denies humanity; they deny the human will to learn from history; they deny the basis for a civilised world community.

Yesterday I wrote the following words in the Book of Remembrance at Yad Vashem: 'The Holocaust, the most evil of all crimes, requires us to be advocates for life, for human rights, for peace and for freedom, for all time'.

And I would like to add here today, before you, the representatives of Israel: rest assured that whenever Israel's security and existence are threatened by speeches like those made by the Iranian President, or even by actions, the European Union will stand by your side, without hesitation.

Ladies and gentlemen, Our continent's Judaeo-Christian heritage has been decisive in shaping the shared values of today's European Union, including respect for the inviolable dignity of human beings.

Cooperation between Israel and the European Union has been steadily improving in recent years.

Israel's participation in the European neighbourhood policy is reshaping and lending fresh impetus to our mutual relations. After all, Israel was the first partner country with which the European Union agreed an action plan under the auspices of that neighbourhood policy, an action plan from which Israel can now benefit. This is a sign of the trust which exists today between Israel and the European Union.

That trust will be strengthened by the fact that the Association Council, which held its most recent meeting at ministerial level in Brussels in March, endorsed the aim of privileged status for Israel under the neighbourhood policy.

There are further signs of positive developments in our bilateral relations. I regard it as particularly important for a successful future that Israel should be the first, and thus far only, non-European country to have been fully integrated into the EU's Framework Programmes for Research and Development. Through its participation in the Seventh Framework Programme, Israel will become part of a strong European research area – a step entirely consistent with the action plan, which provides for Israel's involvement in European policies and programmes to be steadily broadened.

We are also forging ever closer economic links: the European Union is Israel's main trading partner – more than 30% of Israel's exports go to the European Union, and 40% of its imports come from the Union – and the trend is upward.

The European Parliament is advocating that our relations should be broadened to cover the services sector, which is important for Israel, and agriculture. We should also actively address the issues of energy security and cooperation in the development of renewable energies.

Over and above the purely economic aspects, however, the European Parliament also regards efforts to encourage contacts between people as very significant; we attach particular importance to supporting and fostering exchanges between artists, representatives of civil society, firms and, first and foremost, young people.

In the near future, a new scholarship programme will enable Israeli students to enrol at the Collège de l'Europe in Bruges.

On many other important issues, such as the protection of minorities or the fight against racism and xenophobia, we see potential for closer and deeper political dialogue.

This year we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Treaties of Rome, the Treaties establishing the European integration process. We in the European Union are proud of what has been achieved for the people of our continent in what is, from an historical viewpoint, a relatively short period of time – much more than the founding fathers of the European Union could ever have imagined. We are celebrating more than 50 years of peace, stability, prosperity and progress for our citizens.

Fifty years ago, what was initially a small band of courageous men and women – former enemies →→ decided to set aside the mistrust, not to say hatred, that still existed at the time and to instead choose reconciliation. We have reached the point we are at today because, after centuries marked by war, we chose the path of right over might, not might over right, a path towards reconciliation, mutual respect and cooperation.

The path we chose has not been an easy one: it was and is often difficult, calling for patience and, above all, mutual trust. Although we have not yet reached the end of that path, this European unification process can already be described as a success, one which is securing peace and stability to the benefit of everyone.

The 'Berlin Declaration', adopted jointly on 25 March 2007 by the 27 European Union Member States, the European Parliament and the European Commission, highlights a significant fact:

'That hope (of peace and understanding) has been fulfilled. European unification has brought about a sense of community and overcome differences. We, the citizens of the European Union, have united for the better.'

I do not say this in order to praise my fellow Europeans, but rather because it imposes a duty on us. Fundamentally speaking, 50 years of European integration have enabled us, in the European Union, to redefine the concept of security. We no longer understand it as security against one another, but as security with one another.

We in the European Parliament see it as our responsibility to advocate our values outside the Union's borders. Precisely because we have learnt from the history of our continent, it is our goal and our duty to foster efforts to achieve peaceful coexistence on the basis of tolerance and cooperation outside the Union's borders as well. This is why European soldiers are making an important contribution to peace by patrolling the sea off the coast of Israel and Lebanon.

Next year, in 2008, we will together celebrate the 60th anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel; you also look back on a short but very eventful history. Is it not now time to satisfy the people's desire for a peaceful life founded on security and respect for their fellow human beings, a desire which for so many people was one reason for returning to the Promised Land?

Following the 1993 Oslo Accords, we dared to hope that a genuine step had finally been taken on the road to peace, that reconciliation, dialogue and the power of reason would prevail. Today, however, the region is once again in flames, once again many innocent people have fallen victim to violence. This situation is more critical than for some considerable time.

I condemn in the strongest possible terms the continued firing of Kassam rockets into the State of Israel from the Gaza Strip. The European Parliament calls for the release, on the one hand, of the kidnapped Israeli soldiers, Ehud Goldwasser, Eldad Regiv and Gilad Shalit, and the British journalist Alan Johnston, and, on the other, the imprisoned Members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, and other politicians, including the Minister of Education, Nasser al-Din Shaer.

Israel has a right to defend itself. However, I urge Israel to avoid reacting disproportionately and innocent victims among the civilian population. International law is binding on us all. There can be no peace without justice!

After decades of repeated military conflicts and unrest, has the time not come for peace negotiations? I can well understand that just at the moment Israel has little interest in dialogue. However, does Hebrew not have the word 'Tikkun Olam', which refers to the spiritual duty to work constantly to heal our broken world? I believe that a peaceful settlement should be founded on dialogue, reconciliation and forgiveness. This is the only way in which lasting peace can grow between nations.

We must encourage all moves designed to build trust and bring the objective of a two-state solution closer. There has been too much suffering in the Middle East, too many opportunities have been missed. Recently, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon quite rightly said that the peace initiative by the King of Saudi Arabia was a sign of 'a new resolve in the Arab world'. Let me add the following: we should step up our efforts even further. Together, we should take the Arabs at their word. We should seize the opportunity offered by their fresh commitment to peace.

From the point of view of the European Union, it would be desirable if the Middle East Quartet, which is meeting this evening in Berlin, could also meet here in this region. Multilateral approaches and a cautious policy of gradualism – this is the only way forward on the road to peace. We are encouraged by the clear-sighted response from your Prime Minister and the proposals drawn up at the Arab Summit.

Circumstances must be right if all the parties concerned are to sit down at one table. Just how successful an international forum can ultimately be was demonstrated by the 1991 Madrid Conference. Today, things have changed. However, is the fundamental idea behind that conference not still valid today, even more than in 1991? A conference always represents the start of negotiations, not the end. Nobody is left isolated and mutual trust is built between all partners.

I make no bones about it: to my mind there is no better way of negotiating on peace and security, on future developments and on the peaceful co-existence of Israel and a Palestinian State, within secure borders, without violence and on the basis of good-neighbourly relations, than at a joint conference. Would it not be possible for Israel, the Palestinians, the Arab States and the Middle East Quartet to consider together the format and procedures for and the substance of such a conference? The journey to any such a meeting is certainly a long and difficult one, but any journey requires us all to take a first step.

The European Parliament is convinced that a two-state solution on the basis of the 1967 borders is and remains the only way to a satisfactory solution. The principle of 'land for peace' represents the fairest, most just approach if we are to achieve a balanced and lasting result.

I firmly believe that a Palestinian State with sustainable borders would also bring Israeli citizens greater security and stability.

Every solution, in whatever form, calls for mutual respect. Immanuel Kant once wrote that 'the freedom of each individual begins with respect for the freedom and dignity of others'. People in Israel and Palestine share the same basic human dignity. Irrespective of whether a person is Jewish, Muslim or Christian: there are no degrees of individual dignity!

Ladies and gentlemen,
Please allow me, at this point, to address a matter which is particularly important for us as parliamentarians: the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA) brings together Members of the European Parliament, the parliaments of the EU Member States and the parliaments of those Mediterranean states which do not belong to the European Union – in other words, the countries of North Africa and the Middle East.

It is an important process, because the combination of countries involved makes it unique. However, it is not a Euro-Arab club, but rather an

extraordinary forum for encouraging the intercultural dialogue which can help to bring about better mutual understanding.

I urge you to ensure that Israel fulfils its role and responsibility as a full member of this process and plays an active part in all EMPA initiatives, since dialogue is the first step towards closer friendship and can lead to reconciliation, as it has done, little by little, in Europe over the last 50 years.

Dear colleagues,

Yesterday and the day before yesterday, I had the opportunity to visit the Palestinian territories. Yesterday I was in Gaza, meeting with President Mahmoud Abbas. I was deeply shocked by the economic, social and humanitarian conditions which I saw there, conditions which are unacceptable for the people concerned, unacceptable for the Arab world and unacceptable for the international community. I ask the Government of Israel: please release the Palestinian funds, of about 700 million dollars, which are based on customs revenue, to President Abbas so that he can use them to pay the teachers and police.

The eyes of a Palestinian baby shine just as brightly as those of an Israeli baby. The laughter of Palestinian schoolchildren is just as heart-warming as the laughter of Israeli schoolchildren. Palestinian pupils study just as hard as Israeli pupils. Palestinian mothers and wives weep just as Israelis do, if their husbands have no work, or are in prison or dead.

We must do everything we can to respect the dignity of each individual, irrespective of whether that person is an Israeli or a Palestinian. We must continue along the path of dialogue, a path whose starting point must be the recognition of Israel's right to exist and the halting of all violence. Everybody can and must show goodwill.

If we intend to follow the path of consensus, democracy, security and the abandonment of violence must be linked and must be thought of as a whole. None of those aims can be achieved without the others. Security, the abandonment of violence and mutual recognition hold the keys to building trust, the most precious asset we have and one which we, as Europeans, would like to develop throughout the region.

I have chosen two guiding principles for my term of office as President of the European Parliament: the first is that the dignity of every individual is inviolable, and the second is that we should do everything in our power to foster dialogue between cultures. My aim is to ensure that these principles do not simply remain empty words. My most fervent wish is that the Middle East should become a region in which the dignity of each individual is respected on all sides and at all times. I want to see the Middle East become a region which symbolises dialogue between cultures throughout the world.

This region is the holiest land on earth. However, all too often it is seen as a region of cultural conflict. I am, of course, well aware that the realities are much more complex and that the problems are complicated and have many facets. Nevertheless, all of us parliamentarians who are working to achieve that objective in the context of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership process should ask ourselves repeatedly what more we can do in order to foster dialogue between cultures, mutual respect and the unconditional protection of human dignity.

I am deeply convinced that this is ultimately what the Middle East peace process is all about. The peace process is more than a mechanical political process and it is also more than a huge geopolitical exercise. Fundamentally, it is about establishing a stable basis of trust so that dialogue can develop across religious and national borders and so that respect for the dignity of the individual at all times becomes axiomatic. Today, violence and terror, walls and exclusion too often stand in the way of the ideal I am advocating. Are we doing enough to bring societies together? What more can we Europeans do in this respect, with you and your neighbouring States. I should like to propose two specific projects: The Parliaments of Israel and the European Union embody the authentic traditions of democracy. In this community of values the relationship between Israel and Europe finds its strongest expression. But we are also aware of the responsibility this places on us. We in Europe are impressed by the constant political struggles carried out in this House. The Knesset is the symbol of Israel's strength as a free, democratic country. And the Knesset is highly respected in Europe. We should be doing more, in a joint effort, to bring young people from our regions together and promote the value of democracy, freedom, justice and solidarity beyond the borders of our own communities.

In 2008, the Year of Intercultural Dialogue, I would like to bring young people from Israel and Palestine, the Arab States and the countries of the European Union together, at the European Parliament. I would ask for your support in this endeavour.

I would like to make another proposal: peace begins with the education of our children and with the images that young people have of one another. So would it not be worthwhile if we could examine our school textbooks together, and see how far they are still passing on our prejudices about one another and encouraging stereotypes that are untrue?

Every state has the right to decide on the content of its teaching systems. But we would surely not suffer any loss of sovereignty if European, Arab and Israeli experts got together to exchange their experience on the role of education for peace. Even during the Cold War, the German-Polish schoolbook commission achieved great things. Why not ask school textbook experts from Europe, the Arab countries and Israel pave the way for politics by looking at the images that our children and young people learn about one another?

In Europe Muslims have become the second largest religious community. We in Europe have every reason to ask ourselves regularly if we are doing enough to ensure that they feel at home, in a world that is predominantly Christian or secular in its attitudes. And in Europe, I am sorry to say, we are regularly called upon to deal with cases of anti-Semitic and racist hatred. I utterly condemn these outbursts and I should like to see Jews, Muslims, Christians and people of other religious allegiance, or with no religious conviction, feeling equally at home in Europe.

I am sure you will understand that to me, as a Catholic Christian, the spiritual places of the Holy Land have a particularly heart-felt meaning. I welcome any news that makes clear that Christians in, for instance, Nazareth and other places in Israel feel at home in your country. And during my visit to Bethlehem I saw how all three religions are engaged in an inter-religious dialogue. But that dialogue, which aims to pull down the wall in people's hearts and minds, is opposed by the wall that exists in reality.

I understand the Israeli need for security at the country's borders. But if we are honest, we have to admit that the new security precautions are having oppressive effects on the lives of people on the other side of the wall. I have seen children whose fathers no longer have a steady job to go to. I have seen young people who do not know what a viable business would be like. I have seen men and women who are worried that, as a result, the wall in their minds – and with it the wall of fear and aggression – will continue into the future. And I ask, what will become of the children who are growing up behind the wall? What ideas will they be pursuing one day? What acts will they be lured into taking? If we are honest, we have to ask ourselves this question.

Both things, both politics and religion, can help to bring about peace. The exercise of religious freedom has central importance. That is why the holy places of the religions should always be freely accessible to their members, especially in Jerusalem.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Moses came down from Mount Sinai and brought us the law on tablets of stone. We shall not reach up to his heights, and we should be grateful to recognise our own limits in all humility. But we should also attempt to climb new mountains in our own age. That is the opportunity waiting to be seized. Peace in the Middle East needs a new chance. That is the message that appeals to us from the many disappointments of the last few years and decades. That is the message that we owe to the young people living here and all round the Mediterranean. That is the message that the world is hoping for, and it is a message that we need to bring to life.

The European Parliament stands shoulder to shoulder with Israel because the Jewish people have the right to a secure existence. The European Parliament stands shoulder to shoulder with the Palestinians because they have the same right. They also have a right to receive fair opportunities for their economic and social development.

Let us together overcome the vicious circle of fear, in which no one dares to take the first step forward. When that succeeds, with courage and understanding, with prudence and vision, the holiest land in the world can become a land of salvation for all – for all who live here and for all who look on

Israel with admiration.

The following statement is ascribed to David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel: 'Anyone who does not believe in miracles is not a realist.' We should have the courage to make a new start together. There is huge and untapped potential before us. That is the only way forward, as we are shown by the Psalms: 'Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have embraced' (Psalm 85).

Shalom.