

The case for a privileged partnership between the EU and Israel

*Speech by the Chairwoman
of the German-Israeli Parliamentary Friendship Group
of the German Bundestag,
Hildegard Müller, Member of the Bundestag,
during her visit to Jerusalem*

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to begin by thanking you most warmly for the invitation. I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to be here today and to talk about – and later, perhaps also discuss with you – the relationship between Israel and the European Union.

This is an interesting and also very exciting topic. This has been made clear not least by political developments in recent weeks and months.

And here I am referring not just to recent developments within the European Union. As

you are all aware, the latest round of enlargement presents the EU with an enormous, if long overdue, task. It remains to be seen whether all members are genuinely willing and able to accomplish it. But I'll come back to that later...

No, I am referring not just to internal EU developments, but rather in particular to the relationship between Israel and the European Union. Whenever this was talked about publicly in recent months, the discussion often focused solely on the following subjects:

- Firstly, the EU's antisemitism study,

- secondly, the survey which showed that the EU population viewed Israel as a threat to world peace,
- and
- thirdly, the misuse of EU funds by members of the Palestinian Authority.

The damage caused by the decision not to publish the EU's antisemitism study, and the methodologically flawed survey about countries which pose a threat to world peace, could have been avoided. True, the misuse of funds ultimately led to an extremely detailed investigation by the European Anti-Fraud Office. However, the misunderstandings and offence caused beforehand were foolish and

unwise, and led merely to overreactions which did not reflect the true strength and diversity of relations between Europe and Israel.

This bad news masks a whole range of other, more important facts and factors in Israel's relationship with the EU and vice versa. Allow me to cite a few here as examples. While these aspects may not make any headlines, they speak volumes about the true strength and diversity of relations:

- Europe has close historical and geographical links with Israel and the Middle East. Both regions have been shaped by the heritage of their varied relations. The Middle East is the

birthplace and spiritual home of three world religions which have had a lasting influence on Europe. In ancient times, the Middle East was a centre of knowledge, tolerance and progress.

- Against the background of the persecution and murder of the European Jews, Germany and Europe of course have a special relationship to the state of Israel. Germany is conscious of this history, and bears special responsibility within the EU for Israel as a Jewish, democratic state, and for the consequences of its establishment.

- Close political, economic and cultural relations with Israel underline the fact that economic development and political stability in the region are clearly in the European Union's interest.

Allow me to cite a few figures which provide impressive evidence of this:

- Regardless of the unfortunate and repeated resurgence of political tension, Israel and the EU have maintained dynamic trade relations for years. In 1995, both sides signed an association agreement, which has been in force since the year 2000. The EU is Israel's most important trading partner. Around 40 per

cent of Israeli imports come from EU countries, and the EU receives a third of Israel exports.

- Today, six per cent of more than six million Israelis already hold a passport from an EU country. Another 14 per cent, or 700,000 people, are entitled to apply for one because they or their parents come from an EU Member State.
- And in spite of public tension, an opinion poll showed in March that 85 per cent of Israelis were in favour of their country applying for accession to the European Union. Sixty per cent were clearly in favour, while a quarter

leaned towards support for the idea. (*Dahaf Research Institute*)

If we look at this basically positive relationship, it does at least appear legitimate to pose the following question:

Should Israel join the European Union?

The question of whether your country should perhaps join the “most exclusive club in the world”, as the daily “Maariv” recently called the EU, has already received a positive response from a range of Israeli politicians:

- President Moshe *Katsav* told a newspaper that he hoped Israel would be able to join in the near future.
- Israel's Ambassador in Vienna, Avraham *Toledo*, views membership as being vital to Israel's interests.
- And the Chairman of the Israeli Labor Party, Shimon *Peres*, would like to see Jordan and the future Palestinian state also join the EU alongside Israel. He has gained the impression that Javier *Solana*, the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Joschka *Fischer*, Germany's Minister for Foreign Affairs, look very favourably on this idea.

I too would now like to attempt to examine this in greater detail:

Amidst all the euphoria and enthusiasm felt by these people regarding Israeli accession to the EU, we do ultimately need to examine the facts, which all too often bring us back to more sobering ground.

Let us look at the formal requirements for a state to join the EU: quite apart from the fact that the admission process for countries wishing to join is extremely complicated and arduous, EU membership involves far more than merely joining a “club”. Candidates must fulfil a long

list of criteria, the so-called “Copenhagen criteria”.

There is currently still a whole series of hurdles which Israel would need to overcome. True, Israel is – as I already mentioned – a significant trading and economic partner. We also share a wealth of common values and fundamental beliefs. Let us not forget: Israel is the only genuine democracy in the region. And last but not least, there is a whole range of shared interests, of which one topical example is combating international terrorism carried out by religious extremists. Nevertheless, the unresolved Middle East conflict alone is an obstacle to full membership of the EU. Recent

developments on Cyprus show the extent to which the background of an armed conflict can be a barrier to entry.

Another fact which should be borne in mind is that accession to the EU also involves transferring and relinquishing sovereignty. Becoming part of a union and community means integration and incorporation into a system of varied interests. With regard to economic issues, this process has clearly proven its worth in the EU, but as regards political issues, many questions still need to be answered today. Unfortunately, this is made clear only too frequently by the problems in agreeing a

common European foreign policy – including and in particular on the Middle East conflict.

Yet it is precisely this political dimension which constitutes the core of a genuine European community that can guarantee lasting peace, freedom and security. Unfortunately, this core has not yet fully developed, as the difficult discussions about a joint constitutional treaty showed. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to emphasise what, in my view – and that of my party, the Christian Democratic Union – the European Union must stand for:

To us, the European Union is far more than a glorified free trade area. We see it as a political

union both for citizens and as a union of friendly European nations.

Our values and shared historical experience of tyranny and despotism in Europe during the last century place on us a particular responsibility towards human life and oblige us to protect inalienable human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Allow me to note in passing that our Judeo-Christian inheritance should also be explicitly anchored in the future European constitution for this reason. The Christian values of freedom, solidarity and justice guide our actions as we try to shape Europe's future in a responsible manner.

Since the EU admitted its new Member States in May, it has been extending – mainly towards the east – the structures of a community oriented towards prosperity, social justice, the rule of law and democracy. This major round of enlargement brings great political, economic and cultural benefits to the EU and the people of Europe.

However, the accession of ten new states poses an enormous challenge for the Union. Therefore, before accession negotiations are started with other countries, the experiences of the most recent round of enlargement must first be evaluated. A balance must be maintained between the widening and deepening of the

European Union. I personally – and my party, the CDU – therefore advocate that no decision be taken in the near future on starting negotiations with further states.

There are, unfortunately, many historical examples which show that the power of legal systems and institutions to integrate their members should not be overstrained. Otherwise, they will inevitably be weakened and, in many cases, disintegrate. Admitting further members would place too great a burden on the EU in its current state, and would carry the risk of regression to a mere free trade area. An alternative option to full membership of the EU is therefore needed. It could, for example, be

modelled along the lines of the European Economic Area (EEA).

States which are unable or do not wish to become full members of the EU for the foreseeable future would in this way be able to have a close relationship to the EU without lengthy delays. In addition to the internal market, this “EEA plus” could also encompass issues such as internal and external security. It would be a “privileged partnership” and thus offer prospects for Israel – and perhaps also for Israel’s neighbours.

Since the early 1990s, the EU has indeed been trying to develop a joint policy with some

countries in the Middle East – including Israel. In addition to the association agreement I spoke of earlier, this has also involved the “Barcelona process” and the founding of a “Euromed parliamentary assembly”. However, this alone is insufficient, and Europe must recognise that. Geographically, neither Israel nor the Middle East as a whole are part of Europe. In practice, however, Europe has for a long time been interconnected with the Middle East in diverse ways. The region’s politics directly affect life in Europe.

The suggestion of a “privileged partnership” instead of accession corresponds more closely to the European prospects of Israel and the Middle

East than the proposals and approaches which have thus far constituted the EU's Mediterranean dialogue. Such a partnership would need to – and would – go beyond a pure customs union. It would also be an attempt to involve Israel in a European security and defence policy – with both the well-known security guarantees and the corresponding obligations. It could also form the basis of further cooperation, together with other partners, in combating terrorism, extremism and crime, for example by intensifying cooperation between security agencies.

Europe must recognise – if it genuinely wants peace in the Middle East – that it needs to offer

security. Only if Israel's security is guaranteed can new trust be created. There is scarcely a single other state in the world that, like Israel, is not a member of a regional alliance. And the reasons for this are not primarily of Israel's making. Europe can help to alleviate the feeling of isolation resulting from this. If Europe made a clear commitment to Israel's security through a "privileged partnership", it would be one step closer to greater trust and peace in the region. At a later date, this partnership could then open the door to a political union like that currently being formed in Europe, with walls and fences no longer standing between states.

In conclusion, I would like to quote the newspaper “Maariv” once more. One of its commentators wrote the following about borders coming down within Europe: “Many Israelis look with yearning to an enlarged Europe and want also to be able to dance at the party.” The partnership I have described could be considered an invitation to dance which I would like to extend.