

**Rede von Petra Pau auf der
"Policy Conference" der "European Friends of Israel"
am 6. November 2008 in Paris
(englisch)**

The German-Israeli relationship will always remain a special one

I should like to begin with some good news. This year, thousands of events have taken place across Germany to mark sixty years of the state of Israel: events in towns and villages, in East and West, in town halls and churches, at local festivals and acts of state, with political debates and multi-cultural events. Support in society for these events is very diverse and strong, amongst both young and old.

But here is the bad news: anti-Semitism is still an acute problem – and certainly not just on the far-right fringes, but in mainstream society. Jewish buildings – synagogues, nurseries and schools – still have to receive special protection. I am thus particularly grateful for the fact that there is nevertheless Jewish life in Germany once again. The Nazis endeavoured to wipe it out. Now it is flourishing once again.

Occasionally, people say to me that anti-Semitism has always existed – across the ages and across the world; that this is the way things are. People also say that Israel is fuelling a new anti-Semitism through its policy towards the Palestinians. "So don't be naive", I am told. I am certainly not naïve, especially since I also have criticisms of the Israeli government's policies.

But there are three things which I will not tolerate. Firstly: the Holocaust was a unique and unparalleled crime; it must not be played down in any way. Secondly: the existence of anti-Semitism in other places – even of greater anti-Semitism than in Germany – does not make the Germans' anti-Semitism any better. And, thirdly: anti-Semitism cannot be classified as political criticism; it is a misanthropic ideology.

What we are now examining during this conference in Paris is the question of how we can extend the EU's cooperation with Israel and Israel's cooperation with the EU. All those I asked for advice in advance of this conference told me that, rather than launching new projects, it was important to ensure that the existing programmes are implemented better and more effectively.

I am pleased to say that the spectrum of programmes already in existence is wide. These range from joint efforts to resolve the Middle East conflict, to ambitious projects in the area of science and research, to exchanges of young people aimed at promoting better understanding of the other country and culture.

Incidentally, three days ago, the "German-Israeli Future Forum" began its work. This forum will promote innovative projects and involve young people in particular in shaping bilateral relations. The inaugural meeting of this forum was opened by the German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

In the run-up to this conference, a simple question suddenly occurred to me: what do completely average Germans learn about Israel via everyday media reports? My impression is that they learn next to nothing. And if they do learn anything, then it is either something historical concerning the Holocaust or something current concerning the Middle East conflict. That is the extent of it.

This is undoubtedly important, but it is nowhere near enough. Israel and life in Israel are much more diverse, colourful and full of contradictions than this. And that is why it is so positive that students from Germany will soon be studying at the partner university in Haifa and students from Israel at the partner university in Augsburg, in order to complete their "German-Israeli year". This will give them an opportunity to get to know life in the other country at first hand.

During my visit to Yad Vashem, I learnt that the take-up rate for similar exchange programmes established for school students is still not anything like as high as it should be. This brings me to a problem facing Israel and Germany. We need a culture of remembrance adapted to the present day.

Young people today are no longer the children of victims or perpetrators of the Holocaust. They are not even the grandchildren; they are the great-grandchildren. Their attitude to history is wholly different to that of many of us. And there are fewer and fewer people alive who can recount first-hand experiences of the night of fascism.

History is becoming more distant. So it must be kept alive in a way suitable to the present day. Auschwitz survivor and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature Imre Kertész correctly pointed out in his speech to the Bundestag that the Holocaust was inconceivable before it happened. Now it has happened and is no longer inconceivable. Thus, we must work together to prevent the conceivable inconceivable from happening.

I recently visited a touring exhibition organised by the Anne Frank Foundation. It is designed for 14 year-olds. Lots of school classes visit this exhibition and are looked after there by committed young people a few years older than them. They learn about the fate of Anne Frank, who was the same age as them and participate in lively discussions as to why the courage to stand up for one's beliefs is so vital to democracy.

As a left-wing politician from the Federal Republic of Germany, I wish to stress that the German-Israeli relationship will always remain a special one. This is due to our unique history and the relationship must not simply be "normalised". And that is precisely why I have a particular interest in making sure that these ties are as tightly woven as possible.

I believe there are three levels of importance in this context: relations at state level, including in the EU framework; inter-societal relations, in other words, cooperation between organisations and institutions; and the individual relations maintained through the greatest possible number of personal contacts.

In closing, however, I would like to stress again the fact that the unresolved Middle East conflict constitutes a dangerous burden for all – for Israel, for the Palestinians, for people in the region, for the EU and for the world as a whole. Finding a solution to the Middle-East conflict will therefore remain a central challenge for the EU-Israeli partnership.

I therefore hope that all those involved and affected find the strength and the courage to finally "cut the Gordian knot". A viable Palestinian state and a secure Israel are essential. This is only possible within the framework of international law. And it can only happen if all sides work together, rather than working against one another. With this hope in mind, I would like to extend my best wishes to all the Israel people in the sixtieth anniversary year of the foundation of Israel!