

Politics of Culture in the Dialogue of Civilisations: Europe and the Middle East

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The *European Society of Culture* had its origins in the conditions in Europe after the horrors of the Second World War during the chilling winds of the Cold War. Since that time, the declared goal of helping to overcome the tensions and crises in Europe has found its culmination in the creation of the European Union. Today, membership in the Union no longer means simply taking part in an economic integration process, but also entails a commitment to establishing political unity in adherence to the principles of safeguarding human rights and fundamental democratic values as well as conforming to the rule of law. The European Union is now the deepest form of regional integration in the world, though still a dynamic and an open-ended polity, whose structures created a constitutional body, as yet unfortunately without a constitutional soul.

Nevertheless the following basic idea of the *European Society of Culture* formulated almost 50 years ago in one of the resolutions of its General Assembly, is still and especially valid in one of the world's most distrustful and unstable regions, the Middle East, which will be the crucial region for the peace in the 21st century:

“Man is not the slave of destiny; and dialogue without prejudice, reserve or deception of any kind between individuals and peoples is, in itself, a cardinal force, capable of reducing the tensions of violence and radically transforming the conditions of existence in societies and the relations between peoples, so that the

antagonisms which lead to war may disappear.”¹

In the course of its existence, the achievements of the *European Society of Culture* have gained far-reaching recognition, not least in the former Soviet Union. Soviet *hommes de culture* made their mark in the activities of the *European Society of Culture* shortly after its creation, participating in the conferences of the Council and the General Assembly. I hope that in the near future, in light of the new and dangerous circumstances of world affairs, the *European Society of Culture* will also be able to create a *Middle East Centre*, which will be as active as the former Soviet, now Russian Centre.

The *European Society of Culture* has always insisted on the idea that it is peoples – not states – who bear the responsibility for peace. The *European Society of Culture* has done this because its members have always held the strong belief that the field of action of the *politica della cultura* (politics of culture), which is at the core of thought of the Society,² is not that of state power but of civil society,³ a concept which I have tried to work out for the future possibilities of today’s almost-united Europe.⁴

I was asked to talk about the *possibilities of politics of culture and dialogue in the Middle East* (and I would like to add: the dialogue between the Middle East and Europe). This task is not easy for me. Although I have some experience in this region teaching as a guest professor of European Studies in Haifa and Jerusalem, nevertheless I am still speaking as an outsider about images and experiences of this highly contested Holy Land for Jews, Muslims and Christians.

¹ Resolution of the 7th General Assembly of the SEC (1958).

² “La posizioni espressa nei due appelli, per esprimerci anche qui in breve formula, mi pare si possa caratterizzare in questo modo: vi sono due posizione estreme, quella della *cultura politicizzata*, cioè della cultura che ubbidisce a direttive, programmi, imposizioni che provengono dai politici, e quella della *cultura apolitica*, cioè della cultura staccata della società in cui vive e dai problemi che in questa società si presentano.” (N. Bobbio: *Politica culturale e politica della cultura*. In: N. Bobbio: *Politica e cultura*. Nuova edizione. Torino 2005 (1955), 20).

³ C.f. N. Bobbio: *Gramsci and the Concept of Civil Society*. In: J. Keane (ed.): *Civil Society and the State*. Verso 1988, 78–80.

⁴ See: M. Schäfer: *Towards a Supranational European Civil Society*. SEC/Venice 2005. Online: <http://www.societaeuropeacultura.it>

The current relationship between Europe and the Middle East has its origins in the colonial period in which Europe was present in the Middle East through a long history of political and military interventions. The situation in the Middle East today can be understood as the legacy of modern European history, and therefore the conflict in the Middle East today is first and foremost a conflict between two victims of Europe. They had the same oppressors: “The Jews, most of whom were murdered in Europe, and some who fled it; and the Arabs, most of whom were colonized by Europe in military, economic or cultural ways.” And Fania Oz-Salzberger, the daughter of the famous Israeli writer Amos Oz and a former colleague of mine in Haifa continued: “I am not sure to what extent Europe today recognizes the vast depth of its responsibility for the bitterness, the insult, the distrust and the phobias of both sides in this extremely psychological war. I am not sure to what extent Europe realizes that each side in the Middle East conflict sees its enemy as a horrible reflection of Europe itself, of the European persecutors. For many Arabs, the Israelis are arrogant white colonizers armed with tractors and guns, set to conquer and destroy Arab homes, traditions and customs, Arab faith and morality, with the cold gleam of European weapons and European superiority. For many Israeli Jews, Arab leaders and soldiers and terrorists are latter-day Nazis, armed with the deepest historical and racial hatred toward Jews as Jews, committed to the full and terminal elimination of the Jews from the face of the land.”⁵

What does this have to do with the new Europe and with the European Union’s hope of becoming a central mediator in the Middle East instead of playing solely a secondary political role in this region in which the United States has become the most influential power? I would not like to attempt to speak for the Palestinians, but I can say something about the Israeli side of the matter.

⁵ F. Oz-Salzberger: Images of Europe: An Israeli Perspective. A paper presented at the European Commission Conference “Intercultural Dialogue”, Brussels, March 20–21, 2002, 2–3. Also: A. Oz in: Profiles. The Spirit Level. Amos Oz writes the story of Israel. By D. Remnick. In: *The New Yorker*, November 8, 2004, 14.

In Europe, bitter experience has taught us how fundamental the values of respecting human rights, liberty, equality and solidarity are and how great the mission is that they represent. These are values which bind the European peoples and which are internalized in many European treaties. The Second World War and the Cold War taught us the importance of shared values and mutual trust for peace in Europe.

But this European Union as a trans-national entity has generally a rather negative image in Israel, although there are growing trade relations between Israel and the European Union, which make Europe Israel's most important trading partner. Relationships at the political level, however, are frequently marked by disappointment, scepticism and distrust.⁶ In particular, for many Israelis, political statements from Europe are morally confused and hypocritical, constantly verging towards appeasement and anti-Semitism, and many Israelis see Europe as underestimating the threat posed by international terrorism and as unwilling to undertake the necessary measures to counter this threat.⁷ The European Union receives little attention from and is of little interest to the Israeli media. Israelis find it therefore difficult to come to terms with the ongoing process of integration in Europe, having to continue to defend the very existence of a nation state they built just over half a century ago. Israel, born out of two thousand years of Diaspora and always faced with external threats, has naturally been grounded in strong nationalistic feelings. The Zionist project is more familiar with Europe's past rather than with its present conception. The almost total self-reliance, the praxis of sovereignty, the importance given to land and control of borders as well as to military rather than civilian components of security are core principles of the state of Israel. The European states, however, have developed the European Union to make those principles obsolete, by pooling

⁶ On the other hand, Israel was among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community.

⁷ D. Keridis: Europe and Israel. What Went Wrong? *The Madame Madeleine Feher European Scholar-in-Residence Lecture*. Bar-Ilan University, 2004, 10-11; G. Dachs/J. Peters: Israel and Europe. The Troubled Relationship: Between Perceptions and Reality. Discussion Paper of the Israeli European Policy Network. Ben Gurion University of the Negev 2005, 7.

national sovereignties, practising mutual trust, abolishing borders and establishing the Union as a civilian rather than a military power.⁸

Furthermore, in Israel's collective memory many European states played and still play a shameful role. For them most of the Europeans increasingly turn away from the Holocaust as a *living* (albeit not as a *formalized*) memory and anti-Semitism is again on the rise in some Member States of the Union. Germany, for quite evident reasons, is in the eyes of many Israelis the only European nation that has been conducting a serious dialogue in terms of historical memory with Israel.⁹ Germany as one of the "best friends", as Israelis know, will continue to act as an advocate of Israeli concerns in Europe.¹⁰ Many other European nations, whose relations with Israel have been based too often on an opportunistic *realpolitik*, seldom troubled themselves to carry on a genuine historical dialogue with Israel. Eastern European nations under communist regimes, and of course also the Eastern part of Germany, have denied their own responsibility in relation to the Holocaust.¹¹ On the contrary, for many Europeans it was only Israel's stunning victory in 1967 with the subsequent occupation of Arab lands and the harsh treatment of the Palestinian civilian population that transformed the Jewish state in their eyes from a persecuted people (David) into an aggressive militarized society (Goliath).¹² In sum, for me as a European citizen occasionally working in Israel, a new kind of dialogue between the new Europe and Israel (and of course between Europe and Palestine and in the Middle East as a whole) is therefore urgently needed.

⁸ G. Chevallard: The European Union's Relations to Israel. In: *Troubled Waters: Europe and Its Relations with the United States and Israel*. Ed. by B. Kühnel. Conference and Lecture Series 1 (2003). The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Helmut Kohl Institute for European Studies, 15.

⁹ F. Oz-Salzberger: Images of Europe: An Israeli Perspective. Paper for the European Commission Conference "Intercultural Dialogue". Brussels 2002, 5 and in: [Bridging the Chasm: Europe and Israel](#). In: *Aufbau* 16 (2003), 3.

¹⁰ J. Joffe: Israel, Germany, America: Reflections on a Curious Threesome. In: Publications of the Bucerius Center for Contemporary German History and Society. University of Haifa 2001, 12.

¹¹ F. Oz-Salzberger: [Bridging the Chasm: Europe and Israel](#). In: *Aufbau* 16 (2003), 3.

¹² D. Keridis: Europe and Israel. What Went Wrong? *The Madame Madeleine Feher European Scholar-in-Residence Lecture*. Bar-Ilan University, 2004, 5-6 and H. Münkler: Wer ist David? Vom asymmetrischen Kriege. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 19.08.2006, 31.

Israel is part of the Western family and the links between Israel and Europe go beyond a simple matter of trade and commerce. Israel owes a great deal to its European political and cultural sources. Even with the unique relationship of religion and traditionalism, Israel is a state that values democracy and the rule of law. Israeli court systems have taken the lead in promoting a democratic culture. Israeli public discourse, even under extreme pressure of terror and readiness to use military force, is often deeply self-critical, pluralistic, and profoundly free. In this context, the great error of the European Union is that it largely ignores active and creative Israeli civil society in favour of official Israel.¹³ The process of bringing Israel, Palestine and Europe closer together must primarily take place between societies and cultures, not governments. Today, both governments – on the Israeli side mostly falling back on Zionist strategic thinking and opting for national unity and security over lasting peace, and on the other side, the new Palestinian government more than ever under the influence of the radical forces of Political Islam or Islamism¹⁴ – give less reason for hope than ever of finding a solution for the ongoing conflict. But it is important to remember that at some periods in history Muslim societies were more tolerant than their counterparts¹⁵ anywhere else in the world and we must also remember that we have active civil societies in Israel, Palestine and in Europe which could carry out the dialogue even in difficult times. However, in this dialogue it is crucial that we discover exactly what those shared values comprise beyond official generalizations between governments such as commitment to democracy, the rule of law or the development of tolerance. Campagnolo's and Bobbio's concept of politics of culture may serve as the framework for such a new dialogue on very controversial questions, in which the "other"

¹³ F. Oz-Salzberger: [Bridging the Chasm: Europe and Israel](#). In: *Aufbau* 16 (2003), 3–4.

¹⁴ Israel and the West in general are confronted with a political ideology under the guise of Islam in its fundamentalist interpretation, which should always – as the impressive example of Tatarstan shows us – be distinguished from the modernizing tendencies within Islam. Over the centuries Islam in Tatarstan evolved into "Euro-Islam" (also referred to as "Jadidism"), a religious ideology adaptable to modernization and economic innovations.

¹⁵ According to Fukuyama it would make no more sense to see contemporary radical Islamism as an inevitable outgrowth of Islam than to see fascism as somehow the culmination of a Christian or (to add enlightened) European cultural tradition, as for instance Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno stated in the famous "Dialektik der Aufklärung" (See: F. Fukuyama: Identity, Immigration, and Democracy. In: *Journal of Democracy* 2 (2006), 12 and M. Schäfer: Die Rationalität des Nationalsozialismus. Zur Kritik philosophischer Faschismustheorien am Beispiel der Kritischen Theorie. Weinheim 1994.)

acts as the corrective of one's own understanding of the world and one's own system of values.¹⁶ And as Richard von Weizsäcker, the former president of Germany, forcefully asserted in his speech in Venice on the occasion of the presentation of the *Prix de la Société Européenne de Culture*: "Es geht darum, zu lernen, ohne Angst verschieden zu sein und daher Respekt und Frieden zu halten. Das ist eine zentrale Aufgabe der Kultur".¹⁷

More concretely, Israelis, Palestinians and Europeans need to be willing to discuss and to understand how their conceptions of democracy, the relationship of state and religion, and common identity sometimes deeply differ. In Israel and Palestine, for instance, religion is more or less identified with the state. Its role may never be totally disengaged from corresponding civil societies and state institutions, although religion corresponding with state and national identities has proven disastrous for the possibilities of the peoples to live together in peace. A new dialogue must be based on an understanding and recognition of the fact that Israel, Palestine and the European Union are separate political projects "which are located at different stages in their historical evolution".¹⁸ All in all, a peaceful Middle East requires a new concept and means of "long-term politics" and not "quick-action politics" such as has been deemed necessary for a "regime change" in Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East.¹⁹ Europe, based on its own experience with its long history of cultural diversity, is a strong advocate for transforming the international community into a reasonably ordered world, with a decisive role accorded to international law and institutions. If the peoples of the Middle East would only so choose, Europe cannot be but their

¹⁶ "La politica della cultura è una posizione di massima apertura verso le posizioni filosofiche, ideologiche e mentali differenti, dato che è la politica relativa a ciò che è comune a tutti gli uomini di cultura e non tocca ciò che li divide. ... Si differenzia dalla due posizione estreme senza essere affatto una posizione intermedia e conciliante." (N. Bobbio: *Politica culturale e politica della cultura*. In: N. Bobbio: *Politica e cultura*. Nuova edizione. Torino 2005 (1955), 22).

¹⁷ R. von Weizsäcker: *Speech on the occasion of the presentation of the Prix de la Société Européenne de Culture*. Venice, June 20, 1998, 8.

¹⁸ G. Dachs/J. Peters: *Israel and Europe. The Troubled Relationship: Between Perceptions and Reality*. Discussion Paper of the Israeli European Policy Network 2004, 5-6.

¹⁹ O. von der Gablentz: *Beyond the Road Map: A Renewed Europe and Israel*. Ed. by B. Kühnel. Conference and Lecture Series 1 (2003). The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Helmut Kohl Institute for European Studies, 23.

closest partner.²⁰

²⁰ M. Schäfer: German Constitutional Patriotism and the Construction of European (Union) Identity. In: F. R. Pfetsch (ed.): Germany Re-United and the European Union: The Role of Germany in European Integration. European Forum at the Hebrew University: Jerusalem 2006, 9–31; Cf. N. Bobbio: Politica culturale e politica della cultura. In: N. Bobbio: Politica e cultura. Nuova edizione. Torino 2005 (1955), 23: "Una politica della cultura dovrebbe essere in primo luogo una difesa e un promovimento di *libertà*, e quindi una difesa e un promovimento delle istituzioni strategiche della libertà."