

We Need a European Position on the Middle East

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Concerning the discussion about the nature of the celebration of 60 years of the state of Israel, I don't remember any celebration of the 200th anniversary of the French revolution. Whenever there is such a celebration, there is a temptation to rewrite history.

Today, November 4, 2008, we are about to enter a completely new century of politics.

What will happen tonight, election eve, in the United States, is something that nobody would have thought to be possible three years ago. You have to imagine that tonight, an 80-year-old African-American lady or man in Virginia will vote for Senator Barack Obama. Their grandparents were slaves and now history is turning around. It is not only that an African American will be president of the United States and an African American family will occupy the White House, but it also shows how incredibly quickly history can change a whole nation. And if this is possible, it also sends a message. We are all over 60 and we are getting older. And this was Senator John McCain's problem.

A New Century with Another Set of Questions

A new generation of politicians is coming with a completely different master plan and evaluation of history. I think one of the biggest problems of Europe today concerning the Middle East is that we simply continue to discuss matters in the framework of the past. It doesn't mean that the past has no value. But we are now entering a new century and a situation where we have another set of questions, and we have to ask them in a completely different way.

Europe had its cover in the last years which was simply to say, "We are allied

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with the Americans, with the United States.” This doesn’t function anymore. It started with a split on Iraq, but also in two other important areas. One was the split on Kyoto and the protocol on climate change, and the other was the split on the International Court of Justice, where the Europeans managed to get the convention without the Americans and, in the end, the Russians also joined Kyoto.

The Nation-State Is Too Small

What does this mean? It means that suddenly we have discovered that the problem in the world is that if you want a multilateral and not a unilateral world, then the nation-state, be it France, Germany or Luxembourg, is too small. If you really want to defend the social contract, the contract of civilization, then the European states can only do so as Europeans. And if all this is true, then, when we consider the Middle East, we have to stop utilizing the definition of politics as one of individual European states guided by the history of each specific state. The first acknowledgement of this was the crisis of the Balkans, and the war started by the Serbs against the Bosnians and the Croats.

At the beginning, the reaction of the European states was linked to their history. What does this mean? It means that the British were for the Serbs, the French were for the Serbs, and the Germans were for the Croats. No one supported the Bosnians. None of the European states had an historical association with the Bosnians, and this lasted for two or three years. After seeing what happened in Bosnia, the Europeans understood that European diplomacy today is not to act within the individual histories of each state, whether French, English, German or otherwise, but to transcend, to go beyond, at least partially, the national position to define the common interest and the common value of the European position.

And this is also true, if you come here, when we approach the Middle East and Israel. The Germans have to stop thinking that the only link to their position is the history of Germany against the Jews. I know that this is not possible. But intellectually, we have to now create a European position, while accepting that Nazism and Stalinism or Communism were European productions, were European history. It is not only German or Russian. It is European — with all that happened.

So when it comes to relating to Israel today, as it marks its 60th anniversary, we Europeans have to completely rethink our position.

Hebron Is Crazy

I want to conclude by addressing the contradictions involved concerning

the issue of security. During this visit marking the 10th anniversary of the activities of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in the country, I have stayed three days here in Israel. I met a lot of people, but the most striking thing I heard was when I was visiting Hebron. And if you walk in Hebron and come into the settlements, you would say, “I have discovered what *meshugenhah* (crazy) is.” It is Hebron.

At first, they didn’t want to let us in because, they said, it is a military zone, and we wanted to go in together with the group Breaking the Silence. In the end, I negotiated with the police chief and I was allowed to enter the area alone, or with one or two other people because the settlers are very angry. So, I said, “No problem,” and we went in and we met the settlers and had a long discussion. And that is when I discovered something that disturbed me a lot. When I had a discussion with the settlers, I said, “Jewish history is that we were forced to live in a ghetto, and the police or the army were there to force us to stay in the ghetto. And now you have an army that helps you and protects you so that you can live in a ghetto. This is absurd.”

They said, “You are right. But we have a religious, historical mission, and if the international community, Americans or Europeans, forced the Israeli government or forced us to leave Hebron, we will say to Israeli society, ‘It will start in Hebron and then the radicals, the Palestinians, would stop only when the last ship with the last Jew has left Haifa.’”

Help Israel Extract Itself from Its Contradictions

And this argumentation is the core of the traditional Zionist argumentation. So the problem of the settlers — and it should be clear that they are not in an easy situation — this argumentation takes them to the core of the definition of Israel. And I think the world should help Israel extract itself from some of these contradictions, of which the problem of the settlers is the most difficult. This is not only a security problem; it is also a problem of defining the question of: Why Israel? It is the problem created by adhering to a definition of Israel that will never force the settlers to leave Hebron. And if you continue to maintain this approach, you will never have a chance to arrive at an accommodation with the Palestinians.

This article is based on Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s opening presentation at “1948-2008: Accomplishments, Challenges and Implications,” a conference held at the Open University in Ra’anana to mark the 10th anniversary of the activities of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Israel and the 60th anniversary of the state.