



Germany and Palestine

Navigating the Troubled Waters of World Politics

During the Cold War, East Germany established full relations with the PLO, West Germany turned toward Israel. Since 1991, however, without being detrimental to Israel, Germany has become the largest financier of the Palestinians in the European Union.

By Wolfgang G. Schwanitz*

The background against which the Germans and Palestinians established relations after the Second World War could not have been more complex. On the one hand, the Nazi dictatorship and the Holocaust imposed a responsibility on the Germans toward the new state of Israel which Bonn accepted, but East Berlin did not.

On the other hand, there were millions of Palestinian refugees, whose fate had been exploited in the typical way by groups of countries throughout the world – free and democratic countries, socialist states, and countries which had not signed any pact.

Bonn and East Berlin were representatives of the Western and Eastern blocs in their policies toward the Palestinians. Not until the iron curtain fell in Europe did the antagonistic Palestinian policies of the two Germanys and the rationale for the cold war come to an end.

The fall of the Berlin Wall provided the reunited Germans and the Palestinians with opportunities. As a result of its good contacts with the two conflicting sides, Berlin can promote a fair compromise.

Divided Germany and Palestine

When two German states emerged in Central Europe, the country of Palestine, as defined by the British mandate and the UN partition plan, no longer existed. Thus, it could not be a direct matter of policy for Bonn and East Berlin. Instead, the governments in West Jerusalem, Cairo, and Amman were regarded as the addressees of the refugee problem.

The Palestinian refugees settled in the neighboring countries. Their integration, return, and compensation came to a standstill. Israel blocked their return. Jordan, however, allowed their integration. Egypt denied them naturalization; that would mean giving in to the Israelis.

Thus the Palestinian issue took on a special role in the relations between the two Germanys. German and Jewish identity were sides of a coin which had West German-Israeli and East German-Palestinian biases in divided Germany and Palestine.

Germans sympathized with the Arabs, Palestinians, Jews, and Israelis all the more since they themselves were taking in millions of their countrymen who had been driven out of their homes by their neighbors.

Old enemies, new friends

During World War II, the Nazis declared Jews and Communists to be their enemies and the Palestinian Arab National Movement, represented by Jerusalem's Grand Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husaini, to be their "natural ally."

As in the First World War, the British, French, and Russians numbered among the enemies of the Germans and Palestinians. Both times the Germans and Palestinians turned out to be losers. After the Second World War, however, there was also a partition in Central Europe similar to that in the Middle East, and the same victors now determined the division of both Germany and Palestine.

The Palestinians had to look for new friends. Hadn't the Jews and Israelis shown them how to gain the support of the great powers? The established centers in London and Paris were out of the question. The British were accused of breaking their promise of independence and handing Palestine over to the Jews as their "national home," whereas the French made themselves unpopular because of the war in Algeria.

New candidates emerged: America, Japan, China, and the "godless" Soviet Union, which shortly before Stalin's death turned from Israel's midwife to its enemy. During the cold war, the powers split into Western and Eastern blocs. The Palestinian leadership chose Eastern Europe as its partner, and East Berlin established full relations with the PLO, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Bonn turned toward Israel.

As junior partners of the world powers, the Germans also dealt uncompromisingly with their national question in the Middle East.

At the mercy of the nations

Everything was caught up in the machinery of the cold war. Often it did not concern Palestine, but Europe's unsolved problems. As long as nuclear destruction threatened the world, the Middle East became Europe's projection surface.

From the perspective of the pact leaders in the White House and the Kremlin, the Middle East was a peripheral region from which war could reach Europe nonetheless.

Both sides therefore used the Palestinians for their own purposes. A benign settlement of its claims to a state, to return, or to compensation was thus impossible. Bonn was more active for the Israelis, East Berlin for the Palestinians. This "dual" policy in pacts intensified the conflicts, as the terrorists demonstrated in the airline hijackings and at the Munich Olympics.

Berlin's policy

When Eastern Europe turned toward democracy, the ideological basis for the East-West conflict was eliminated. East Germans could vote in free elections. America, Germany, and Europe together exert an influence on the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians.

The reunited Germans were the first to build diplomatic missions in Gaza and Jericho. Without being detrimental to Israel, Germany has become the largest financier of the Palestinians in the European Union. If the Palestinians turn toward democracy, a fair settlement will be closer. As in the past, with displaced Germans who lost their homes, it will not happen without hard compromises.

Translation: Phyllis Anderson

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