

Convinced of the Two-State Solution

TRIBÜNE Conversation with German Federal Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer

TRIBÜNE: After initial misunderstandings and protests on both sides, the State of Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany now enjoy a truly amicable relationship. The German side has repeatedly emphasised their “special relations”.

FISCHER: Official relations have indeed become excellent, but of course there remains our dreadful history of Nazi rule and the crime against humanity that was the Holocaust. Our historical and moral responsibility for the Shoah means that we have a continuing duty, and that determines our special relationship with Israel. Naturally, Israelis on their part also cannot forget, nor do they want to. But at the same time we want to shape the future together. That is the present state of our relations. Beyond that, Israel has been engaged in a tragic conflict with its Arab-Palestinian neighbours since its founding. In this regard, we want to do what we can, within the realm of possibility, to help achieve a lasting peace. That, too, is a component of our relations. In the present situation – and this insight exists in both countries – we must think, above all, of the next generation. The generation of parents will leave us at some point and my contemporaries, who have been deeply affected by the conflict between the generations surrounding the Nazi past, are now getting on in years themselves. Now we must ask ourselves how young Germans and young Israelis – the next generation – will shape our relations.



TRIBÜNE: In a conversation with TRIBÜNE, Shimon Stein, the Israeli ambassador to Germany, expressed the fear that, with the passing of the generation of perpetrators and victims, this past will at some point be suppressed.

FISCHER: I don't think so, for one thing, because the past is, of course, deeply rooted in the collective memory of both nations. Time and again it has proved to be a great error when people believed they could escape responsibility for Auschwitz and the Shoah. That would have meant disregarding German history, and that is impossible. As soon as we look back on German history, we must face up to this responsibility. I understand how Shimon Stein's sceptical attitude came about, but do not share his assessment. However, it will be the way the next generation of Israelis and Germans deal with each other and with this dreadful part of our history that first provides a conclusive answer. In this question, which we Germans must address to ourselves first, our relationship to our own Jewish communities also plays a

central role. Unfortunately, the Nazis managed to plant in many minds the enduring misconception that German Jews were not Germans who were an essential component of German culture. Their great and unique contribution was simply denied. Recently, I read an extensive appreciation of Fritz Stern. It is saddening what potential we lost for our country through the expulsion and extermination of the Jews. That is something many non-Jewish Germans have not yet made clear to themselves. A part of the German people was excluded, deprived of their rights in the truest sense of the word, their property destroyed or stolen; then they were driven out and finally murdered. No German patriot, including those in the next generation and the one after that, will be able to disregard this. In this respect, I believe that one of the most important questions of our time is how my generation, the children of the perpetrators and victims, so to speak, can convey this to our children. It is my confirmed opinion that German-Israeli relations, the establishment of which is now marking its fortieth anniversary, can play a great role in this.

TRIBÜNE: At every opportunity that presents itself, you point out Israel's right to defend itself against terrorism. How far does the solidarity of the Federal Republic of Germany go in this regard?

FISCHER: Every government has the right and the obligation to defend its people from terrorism. On the one hand, what is concerned here is solidarity with Israel, but on the other, an accommodation with the Palestinians. Otherwise this tragedy, in which so many innocent people have lost their lives or their health, will go on and on. That is why we are trying to contribute to solving the conflict, by bringing our influence to bear on the Palestinians – of course, always based on our fundamental solidarity with Israel. On that, there can be no bargaining with us and no equivocation. The fact that we have unfortunately made no decisive progress during the past few years, but instead have had to endure severe setbacks, cannot keep us from seeking a political solution. It must be durable, bring security and put an end to terrorism and violence. Striving for such a solution is an integral part of our solidarity with Israel.

TRIBÜNE: The appeals to the late Yasser Arafat and demands that the Palestinian Authority put an end to the murders of civilians – including women and children – have unfortunately been unsuccessful to this day. In contrast, pressure is constantly put on Israel to alter its policies.

FISCHER: We know that Israel is the only nation whose neighbours call its existence into question, in the truest sense of the word. Israel is the only nation whose survival is really endangered if it loses a battle. Therefore it is also necessary for it to have military superiority. But superiority must always be accompanied by prudence – you can read that in the ancient scriptures. The main reason we are so convinced of the two-state solution is our awareness of the demographic factor. We do not believe that, in the long term in the 21st century, the population percentages can be ignored; that is why two states are needed. It is foreseeable that in a few years there will be an Arab majority between the Jordan Valley and the Mediterranean Sea. Because we are convinced of the significance of the Jewish character of the State of Israel as a homeland for Jews throughout the world, we see the necessity of the two-state solution. But such a solution requires compromises – compromises that are very, very difficult to negotiate – on both sides. A chaotic situation on the Palestinian side is not in the interest of Israel either. That is why we must open up realistic prospects for both sides with the two-state solution. That will not leave Israel's security unaffected. We want the withdrawal from Gaza to be a success. But it must be embedded in the Road Map. It cannot mean first Gaza and exclusively Gaza, because that would not put an end to the violence. On the other

hand, Israel is justified in asking whether in the end there will be a state and continuing terrorism, an undesirable result. Here, the Palestinians have an obligation. But altogether, I see no alternative to this process. On the one hand, you will find no one, even among the most moderate and responsible Palestinian politicians, who would agree to a final status that was not based on the 1967 borders – with all the necessary compromises that entails. On the other, I am well aware of the problem this in turn poses for Israel. After Yasser Arafat's death, we are now at a crucial point. A credibly legitimated leadership must be found. The elections are of central importance to this. Germany and the EU are helping to finance the election preparations.

TRIBÜNE: You are one of the few politicians in the EU who, despite legitimate criticism of Israel, assess the situation in the Middle East discerningly. Because of the obviously one-sided pro-Palestinian partisanship, the fundamentalists have now managed to make the mechanisms of radicalisation and terrorism seem to be part of the political culture.

FISCHER: The reason lies deeper than in one-sided positions. The development which you address here does exist. Suicide attackers give expression to it, as we saw in the iniquitous actions of the criminals on 11th September 2001 in the US, and can now observe first and foremost in Iraq, where they contribute substantially to destabilising the situation. In Israel, the question arises of whether it will be possible to reach a compromise with the Palestinians. But above that there is the matter of modernising the Arab-Muslim world. That goes far beyond Israel and is based on impediments to development that have entirely different origins. In this respect, we face a double challenge in the present situation. As far as the EU is concerned, it has an unjustifiably bad reputation in Israel. It is forgotten that without the EU there would have been no Palestinian financial reform. If the EU had not supported the Palestinians, Hamas would have become even more effective. We have used this influence to begin reforms: without us there would be no Palestinian prime minister and no Road Map, which admittedly did not come exclusively from the EU, but which was initiated by it. If you look closely and leave rhetoric aside, you will recognise that the EU has often acted very much in Israel's interest. I am glad that trade relations between Europe and Israel are especially strong. The division caused by the West Bank barrier signifies a step away from the Oslo Peace Accords, which were based on Shimon Peres's vision that a new Middle East could emerge. It turns Israel once again into an almost exclusively Mediterranean country, and thus its relationship with the enlarged EU plays an enormous role – particularly when it comes to trade. We continue to make intense efforts to improve relations between Europe and Israel, and such efforts are being made on Israel's part as well.

TRIBÜNE: But how are talks to take place? As soon as a date for talks is agreed between Israelis and Palestinians, it is immediately torpedoed by a brutal terrorist attack, and then the negotiations cannot be carried out.

FISCHER: The Palestinian side must be a credible partner, and the Europeans are also working on that. Elections are now of central significance to ensure that no vacuum emerges. There will always be those who try to torpedo peace efforts with terrorism. Distrust is great in Israel. The majority of Israelis know that even an ideal leadership cannot stop terrorism at a moment's notice. But having a credible partner is simply decisive. As tragic and terrible as individual events may be – if credibility and trust existed, they could be dealt with differently. This loss of trust on both sides is, of course, immense. The Israeli side suffers under terrorism. The Palestinian side keeps experiencing further losses of territory, especially in the West Bank, and from time to time, excessive violence. That leads to the fear that in the end only an infinitesimal number of Palestinians will still have any prospects of life there.

This is the Palestinian view of the situation, and the experiences of both sides have led to a complete mutual loss of trust. This trust cannot, in my view, be re-established without help from outside, in the first place from the US, but also from Europe.

TRIBÜNE: But we always criticise the Israelis' emergency defence measures and make no attempt to keep things in balance.

FISCHER: Oh no, you're mistaken. There are disproportionate actions on Israel's part, which I have, of course, criticised. Nonetheless, if anything, the Arab-Palestinian side complains that we deal too uncritically with Israel. When I was in Alexandria recently, on my way to a press conference with my Egyptian counterpart, the news of a terrorist attack in southern Israel reached us. I thereupon condemned the attack sharply during the press conference. An Arab journalist accused me of saying nothing against Israeli actions, but immediately criticising – I quote – “Palestinian operations”, as he called them, publicly and loudly. So perceptions obviously differ very widely here.

TRIBÜNE: You are an exception – I have already stressed that – because you view the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis with discernment. But the majority of critics in the media and politics do not do so.

FISCHER: No, no. You see, I experience at close hand what the European Union, what Javier Solana and others do. I can only emphasise once again: they are real partners who want a settlement and who have understood that it presupposes a willingness to talk, and to talk candidly, on both sides. There are positive developments, to which the European Union has contributed decisively, as I already explained before. In addition, I know from my daily work that there is a true readiness among the Europeans to help to the best of their ability. Just think of the successful visit to Israel by my French colleague and friend Michel Barnier. Such activities open opportunities to intensify not only bilateral links, but also European-Israeli relations as a whole, and thus open new ways in the peace process.

TRIBÜNE: Although, five years ago, there was no sign that there would be a war against Iraq, in a conversation with our magazine at the time you expressed the fear that that country could collapse, and said “chaos” was “to be expected” should this happen.

FISCHER: Did I really put it that way, five years ago? I wish I had been wrong.

TRIBÜNE: You actually described it perfectly correctly in 1999. How do you assess the situation now? Is it still possible to foresee a solution?

FISCHER: I don't want to lay claim to a far-sightedness here that I don't deserve. It is just that at the time I had studied very carefully the reasons that had deterred the father of the present US president and his government from going to Baghdad. That made the subsequent developments foreseeable. Now, however, it is imperative that we work towards a solution. But unfortunately the positive options are narrowing more and more. That is the great problem. Why, after the end of hostilities, was the Afghanistan model not adopted immediately? Why wasn't everything staked on liberation? In Afghanistan a mechanism was developed. There are indeed terrorist forces there, the Taliban and al-Qaida, but the majority of Afghans feel they have been liberated. We could see that clearly during the elections, those impressive images of long queues outside the polling stations and the commitment to voter registration, despite the terrorism against women. All this makes it clear that the Afghans perceive the presence of the international community and even the military under NATO leadership not as occupation, but as aid, aid in their reconstruction. In Iraq, the decisive question of liberation or occupation has regrettably been answered otherwise. I was deeply sceptical of the process from the start, and I repeatedly said so to the Americans. By the way, in Israel I was criticised for doing so, even by my friend Shimon Peres. But there were also

some sceptics in Israel. They remembered flowers and rice being thrown at the invading forces in Lebanon, and how it turned out afterwards.

TRIBÜNE: Can you explain to yourself how the Americans, despite their “think tanks” and all their strategic planning, could misjudge the post-war situation so badly? Were they incapable of understanding a mentality foreign to them?

FISCHER: That is hard to explain. Perhaps I will try to in my autobiography, should I write one in a few years. You see, America is the continent of principles. American society and American culture represent the modern because, unlike other societies, they are not rooted in an age-old history. This nation was created by members of all the other nations, on the basis of the principles of the constitution, of sovereignty of the people. A really modern founding, a nation based on such tenets – that is something unique, a truly new world. The US was created in disassociation from Europe. It was not just a matter of the American Revolution; people wanted to divest themselves of all the ballast attached to absolutist states and leave that nightmare of history behind them, in order to found a new nation based on principles of reason. That succeeded. The entry of the US into world politics took place in the late 19th century, and later became even more intense because of the First World War. At the time, however, the development of international policies was not yet determined by the US, but by the European powers and their hegemonic conflicts. This led to the self-destruction of Europe, but it was a clearly defined, broad stream of history and the US was very successful in this stream. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the Soviet Union this stream ended. Because the US is a nation that is based not on history but on principles, it can view the world differently – admirably differently. That is also why I consider all the talk of an empire to be wrong, because imperialist ambitions would be completely at odds with the soul of this nation and its everyday life. This distance from history and nearly exclusive orientation towards its principles are the great strength of the US, but also its weakness. Perhaps they constitute a partial explanation for the mistakes and misjudgements regarding Iraq. That is why I am ultimately deeply convinced that we Europeans, with our sense of history, can really contribute to solving this conflict. There are some people who hold the conviction that the Europeans are from Venus, but the Americans from Mars. That is a grotesque misconception. Rather, we Europeans are the survivors of Mars, and the Americans were, like all leading nations, always strong when they trusted in their “soft power”, their values, and even their product orientation and the subversive force of their liberal society. A purely military dominance will, in my view, only result in a distortion.

TRIBÜNE: So you would speak of a lack of sensitivity towards other cultures on the part of the Americans or the American administration.

FISCHER: No, I would not speak of sensitivity in this context, but of dissimilarity. You see, Europe is the continent of history. The Middle East is a continent of history and religion, where religion and history are intimately linked, in the book of the Jewish people, the Old Testament, and in the region as a whole. The Americans, imbued with their sense of principle, come up against this. They collide. I certainly don't mean by this that we should call the Americans' principles into question; instead we should be grateful, because they have become a guiding light for freedom throughout the world. But in order to come to an understanding with others, a certain feeling for history is necessary, and that is more at home in Europe, for good or ill. We must succeed in uniting the two. That makes the West indispensable to the world. If we succeed, it could really be a starting-point for a better future, because right now we face an important question: can we allow ourselves to let substantial segments of the Muslim-Arab world see globalisation as an external force and – although they need a

great deal of investment and technical and scientific advancement – register an essentially negative development for themselves? We will have to face this challenge, because it is here that the actual roots of terrorism lie. In terrorism, we are dealing with a new totalitarianism, which affects us Europeans as well, because our own security is also at stake. And for Israel, it concerns the central issue of its existential security in the 21st century.

TRIBÜNE: At the Berlin ambassadors' conference in September last year, the deep rift between the Orient and the Occident became clear once again. The Aga Khan, the spiritual head of the Ismaili Muslims, challenged the West to get to know Islamic civilisation "more deeply and comprehensively". In your opinion, would that not mean the great danger of strengthening existing prejudices? After all, there are still many countries among them that are ruled by Sharia law.

FISCHER: No, but that may be because I grew up at a particular time in a strongly Catholic environment, which made me familiar with theocratic elements in politics. I know that such forms are not limited to Islam. That is why we actually have every interest in a modern Islam. If you look at the totalitarian interpretation of Islam of an Osama bin Laden or the Jihadists, you will soon notice that we are not dealing with a throwback to the past. Instead, the religious past is being used to develop a revolutionary totalitarian ideology, which is meant to justify the use of violence and terrorism and ultimately to facilitate the establishment of a bloody dictatorship, especially on the Arabian Peninsula. The Muslims of Europe are able to live differently, and I want to say here again that people like Ignatz Bubis have made a tremendous contribution to this. When Turks living in Germany were attacked, when we had to endure Solingen and Rostock, he stood up for them. It was the Central Council of Jews in Germany with its chairman Ignatz Bubis that spearheaded the defence of the rights of Muslims. This has had an impact right up to the present day. Such experiences make me optimistic that a westernised Islam, a European Islam, is possible. At the same time, it offers an opportunity for modernisation. There are historical examples of this. Permit me, as a Catholic, to say that. Just imagine what sort of position we would be in if today we still had to deal with a Catholicism that stood at the extreme right. It does indeed still exist, but it does not account for the mainstream of Catholics in Europe, not even in the Mediterranean countries. So you see, fundamental modernisation is also possible in religion.

TRIBÜNE: But Catholicism has rejected radical proselytisation. The Islamists do not.

FISCHER: There were also times in which Catholicism used every possible means to proselytise. But as far as Islam today is concerned, we can only explain our views from outside. The question of modernisation can ultimately be fought out only within Islam. It is linked to the rights of women, but also to other matters. One thing is clear: the majority of Muslims will have to conduct this debate.

TRIBÜNE: Islam says explicitly that it wants to proselytise, including through the use of violence. Do we have anything to set against this insane call to arms, "You love life; we love death"?

FISCHER: Such lunatic ideas also existed elsewhere. Think, for example, of the fascist call to battle in Spain, "Viva la muerte". The majority of Muslims love life just as much as we do. If you look more closely at the great culture of Islam, you cannot say that it is a culture of death. No, this attitude is deeply totalitarian and more reminiscent of European spiritual history. Unfortunately, we know "You love life, we love death" all too well from the twentieth century, but I am firmly convinced that the majority of Muslims would be opposed to it. Such a way of thinking is utterly unacceptable to us all. We have to get through this

struggle, and we have to do so successfully. Such a form of totalitarianism cannot be accepted. It must and will be combated and defeated; there is no alternative.

TRIBÜNE: In your opinion, our security is endangered much more by regional conflicts than by confrontation between the major powers. The Cold War era is indeed over, but that does not mean we are completely limited to the role of spectators.

FISCHER: With the fall of the Berlin Wall, not only did the bipolar system of the Cold War disappear, the end of a three-hundred-year history of the European system of nation-states that emerged from the Peace of Westphalia also became apparent. Since that time, the principle has applied that power belongs to the sovereign states and these sovereign states attempt, using the politics of equilibrium and even wars, to defend themselves against hegemony. Industrialisation and the democratic revolution deprived this model of nation-states of its basis, and decolonisation ultimately globalised it. The same Europe that gave birth to these ideas and turned them into socio-political reality is now receding gradually through the process of European unification. Our future also looks different because, by the middle of this century, more than eight billion people will be living on this earth. Everything is growing except our resources. If we now resort to new totalitarian ideologies and believe we can solve the problems that lie before us by violence, it will lead us into a cul-de-sac. We would discover to our sorrow that a hegemonic conflict between China and the US, for instance, would have nothing but losers. Our prospects lie in cooperation as a result of technological and scientific advances, population size, limitation of resources, and dependence on each other. An example of this dependence: in former times, who would have had much interest in what was happening in Afghanistan? In the twentieth century, the attack on the United States came from Afghanistan; we must not forget that. If one imagines that our future lies in conflict, it is a nightmarish prospect in which the winner is also the loser. Bit by bit, the necessity arises of cooperating, working together and balancing interests. On the opposing side stand new totalitarian challenges like those we are now facing. These, too, we must confront resolutely together. Please let us not forget that it was during a conflict, the war for survival, the Second World War, that Roosevelt developed the idea for a new world order. It was during a war for survival with Stalin that Truman further developed this new world order, with its alliances and competing systems. We face an analogous situation. On the one hand, we must defend our freedom resolutely; on the other, however, we must not only fight the sources of this totalitarianism, but at the same time promote a new order. That is not easy. It will take more than a few years and it presupposes a strategic consensus between the US and Europe. But I don't know what else would work.

TRIBÜNE: Admittedly, we have no patent remedy for combating militarism and terrorism. But we must find a way. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, we nourished the great hope that we could defend human rights beyond national borders. But it was a short-lived dream.

FISCHER: I don't know. I don't know whether or not you are right. Indeed I doubt that you are right. Globalisation is our common destiny in the 21st century. With Karl Marx I could simply say: globalisation is a necessity of the productive forces. We will only be able to guarantee prosperity and security if we shape this globalisation politically. That is the great challenge facing the West. I say consciously "the West" – the US and Europe. It also includes solving tragic regional conflicts like those that exist between Israel and its neighbours, especially between Israel and the Palestinians. And there are also others that are extremely dangerous. That is why it is essential to make opportunities for advancement possible. It is really perfectly clear: half the Arab world is less than 18 years old. If this young generation has no economic prospects – and I am not speaking about the poorest of the poor,

I am speaking of the middle classes, I am speaking of those who have a secondary education but still experience only joblessness – it will raise questions of security that pertain not only to the region, but to us Europeans as well. Of course the option of emigration exists, but it is not possible for many people. If we offer no alternatives, they will quickly become susceptible to the temptations of terrorism where they are. You can see this in Algeria, which has suffered dreadfully under terrorism and still does. So it follows that we have every conceivable interest in reform in the Middle East, in reform throughout the entire region. This will only be possible with our united efforts and it will be very difficult, because, of course, it upsets existing power structures. It is anything but easy. Nevertheless, we must not forget that terrorism also strikes in Arab societies, and it is precisely there that the attacks are at their most atrocious. I think we must and can face this challenge. I do not number myself among the pessimists. If the West establishes a strategic consensus on this, we can work on this task together from both sides of the Atlantic.

TRIBÛNE: Back to Israel: thoughts and feelings can be represented very graphically with symbols. What personal symbol do you think of in connection with Israel?

FISCHER: Hmm . . . being in Israel means to me being with many friends in a wonderful country. But to me, Israel also means being confronted with German history over and over again; not only with our continuing responsibility, but also with the pain of what we have lost through our own failure, our own guilt. It is particularly in homes for the elderly in Israel that one can find compatriots of ours from Darmstadt, from Offenbach – marvellous people from everywhere. It pains me to have lost them. Finally, Israel means to me living a very precarious existence. Naturally I cannot forget how I was confronted with the terrorist attack on the Dolphinarium, a discothèque on one of Tel Aviv's most beautiful beaches. Those are vivid memories for me. Israel is a country I always enjoy visiting, and one where I have many friends.

TRIBÛNE: During your term in office, you have presumably received quite a few honours and distinctions. Some of them are very gratifying; others can scarcely be refused. Now a new one is being added: the directorate of the Central Council of Jews in Germany has decided to award you the only prize it has to bestow. It is the Leo Baeck Prize, which does not find a recipient every year. May we offer our hearty congratulations . . .

FISCHER: Yes, and I thank you. I feel very honoured. I was in New York recently, where the magnificent Fritz Stern received the Leo Baeck Medal. It is – how can I express it – a distinction that moves me deeply.

The conversation was conducted by Otto R. Romberg.