

A Sort of Common Destiny

TRIBÜNE Conversation with Shimon Stein, Ambassador of the State of Israel in the Federal Republic of Germany

TRIBÜNE: The anti-terrorism measures necessary to the State of Israel are under constant fire from criticism throughout the world. Measured against the situation in which Israel finds itself, the language of war reportage is – we believe – legitimate. As an ambassador, you have to fend off these “attacks” in Germany from the front line – from the barricades, so to speak. Even for a diplomat, that is a delicate balancing act.

STEIN: That’s right. It is a balancing act. In fact, up to now I have received the impression that we have a problem with the portrayal of Israel here in Germany. It has become hard to make clear the difficulties we face. Naturally, this assessment is only an interim balance sheet after three and a half years on the job. I need more time before I can come to a final assessment. Nevertheless, I must state, with a degree

of regret, that it is incredibly difficult for the Germans to put themselves in the Israelis’ place, or to ask themselves the question: “How would I react?” News coverage that I feel is distorted contributes to this. Some members of the media act very one-sidedly. They have abandoned their objective role in order to take sides and make themselves the arbiters of the conflict. Of course that hampers the work of the embassy. But we continue to try to explain here in Germany our own experiences of life in Israel and the corresponding measures we have to take. In that regard, our work has become much more difficult in recent years.

TRIBÜNE: Is it more difficult than the work of previous Israeli ambassadors?

STEIN: I think so. But that is connected with the fact that after the failure of Camp David in September 2000, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalated and that, at the same time, the entire Federal Republic of Germany changed and continues to do so. It also has to do with the fact that we find ourselves in a time of flux as far as the attitude of Germans to their own history, and consequently towards Jews and Israel, is concerned. This continuing change is not without its repercussions on how the Middle East conflict is viewed.

TRIBÜNE: Mr Ambassador, this alteration in mood can be ascertained not only in Germany, but also in France and many other European countries. It has happened everywhere.

STEIN: Yes, but we have to take into account that German-Israeli relations are not like the others. Israel’s expectations of Germany differ – especially in the light of the past – from



those it has of Belgium, Luxembourg or other European countries. It is true that perceptions of our country are changing throughout Europe. But time and again, Germany stresses its “special relations” with Israel. These “special relations” mean that the Germans make a particularly deep commitment to support Israel’s existence and have a special duty towards its security. That is why the expectations the Israelis have of the Germans are the way they are.

TRIBÜNE: Were these “special relations” between Israel and Germany more noticeable earlier than they are today? Have they changed?

STEIN: First, I would like to emphasise that this expression did not come from Israel, but is the way German policies defined these relations. For that reason, the question of what content would satisfy the “special relationship” today should be directed there. Current public opinion polls can provide a barometer of these relations and indication of how they have changed. To the question posed in a Eurobarometer political survey last October, as to who posed the greatest threat to world peace, 65 percent of Germans asked named Israel first, before North Korea, Syria, Iraq and Iran. That turned out not to be the case in other countries. Only the Netherlands – a country that was also favourably disposed to us in the past – assessed Israel similarly. If citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany, which is the second most important nation friendly to Israel after the United States, judge us in this way, it is extremely alarming. Germany does indeed endeavour, like no other country in the European Union, to defend Israel’s standpoints and to minimise anti-Israeli positions as far as possible. But on the other hand we notice a tendency for Germany to set great store by European consensus. That is why it is increasingly ready to hide behind European positions, although in some cases they are unbalanced. One example that saddens us: after the report by the International Court in The Hague, Germany was prepared – together with all the European countries – to vote in favour of the Palestinian resolution. In this case, Berlin’s desire for European consensus was achieved at the cost of its special relations with the State of Israel. All this has been aggravated by the process of “normalisation” within Germany since reunification. The generation of victims and perpetrators is dying out. A younger generation is growing up, and the distance from the Second World War is becoming ever greater. For this reason, the Germans’ parameters regarding their own identity are changing as well. The desire to draw a line under the past, so to speak, to break taboos, is becoming increasingly powerful. All this will inevitably have repercussions on German-Israeli relations, just as it will on relations between Germany and the United States.

TRIBÜNE: But hasn’t the lack of understanding for Israeli concerns also to do with the fact that no real danger has existed in Europe since the Second World War? Europeans cannot relate at all to the concerns of the Israelis, to their longing for security. That is why they do not understand the measures the Israeli government has taken – admittedly, the government is also unable to convey the situation in the Middle East to Europe.

STEIN: As I have said, it is incredibly difficult. Even though we are only a three hour and forty minute flight away from each other, we are actually worlds apart. First, there is the difficulty of putting oneself emotionally in the place of those in the Middle East. Added to that are the differing experiences that Germans and Israelis have had in the course of the past decades, which influence their thinking. Thus, people in both countries have internalised the principle of “never again”, but whereas in Germany this means “never again war”, we Israelis mean we must never again be put in a position in which others determine our fate. Those are two diverging philosophies of life, particularly as we currently find ourselves in a situation in which we must defend ourselves. In Europe and Germany there has always been NATO. The Americans have taken care of security. We live in a region in which war is still a

legitimate means of changing a situation. That leads to fundamentally differing ways of thinking and acting. For Germany, multilateralism is very important. In the past, Israel has had nothing but difficulties with it. That is why we must defend ourselves unilaterally, which meets with incomprehension in Germany and Europe. Besides that, Germany attaches great importance to UN institutions. But we have had very bad experiences with the UN, because we are treated unfairly there. For the Germans, human rights are important as a basic principle. They are also important to us, but, limited by the situation in which we live, our surroundings force us to take measures that are not always consistent with the Europeans' idealistic conceptions of human rights. Germany attaches great importance to international law. We Israelis are nowadays of the opinion that the international law which arose from the Cold War does not take adequately into account the new threats posed by terrorism and extremism. That is why it must be adapted to the new threats. There you see the differences between us and the Germans, the Europeans, determined by Europe's and Israel's differing geostrategic situations. That could get us into great trouble in future. A further point is Germany's striving for a European consensus, which I have already sketched out. This consensus with France and a few other strongly pro-Arab countries poses a great problem for us. That is why we call on the Europeans – before they can take part in settling the Middle East conflict – to formulate a balanced policy in order to win Israel's trust. At present the Israelis have a tremendous lack of trust in the Europeans. Germany could help Israel remedy this by revitalising its "special relations" with Israel. Here lies the great challenge that I see for the coming years. It is the task of those who believe in the German-Israeli relationship to find areas and projects that offer a win-win situation for both partners.

TRIBUNE: It is certainly true that the constant "condemnation" of Israel by the UN and by some EU politicians has to do with the fact that there is a large majority of Arab and Muslim countries in the UN.

STEIN: I don't want to equate the UN and the EU. In the United Nations, we are a member like all the others. Germany's claim to a permanent seat on the Security Council exists because Germany is the third largest net contributor to the UN budget. Little Israel manages to account for half of one percent of all UN contributions. That puts us in 27th place among 195 countries. Nonetheless, we are the only member country that holds no seat in a regional group, because our regional group of Asia and the Middle East does not want us. That makes it even easier to form anti-Israeli majorities and, in a recurring ritual, submit new anti-Israel resolutions for debate. One sometimes gets the impression that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the only one that endangers international security. Not half, not even a third of the time is taken up with other conflicts that are just as dangerous. In addition there is a Human Rights Commission, where "countries that respect human rights", such as Libya and Saudi Arabia, are honorary members. But in the case of genocide such as the current one in Sudan, the UN is incapable of passing even one resolution or taking any measures to stop the killing. That is our problem with this institution. With a few exceptions, such as the resolution founding the State of Israel or Security Council Resolution 242, creating a basis for peace talks in the Middle East, the UN has in its entire history made no contribution to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All the great breakthroughs were made without the participation of the United Nations: the peace treaty with Egypt, the peace treaty with Jordan, and mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. One sees that the Arab states exploit the UN, because when something is really important, they deal bilaterally with Israel or with the aid of the Americans. The Europeans are left on the sidelines. That is why I say that the UN is a story all to itself.

TRIBÜNE: There is a growing anti-Semitism, not only in Europe but worldwide, which we see daily in the media. It is to be feared that the constant criticism of Israel has paved the way for this.

STEIN: That is right. In connection with this, voices were suddenly heard here in Germany, saying it must also be legitimate to criticise Israel. The call was audible everywhere, particularly at the height of the Möllemann affair. This issue is spurious and superfluous, because it has nothing to do with criticism of Israel, but arises from completely different motives. In my opinion, Israel embodies “collective Jewry” for many people nowadays. They project the old uneasiness about Jews onto the State of Israel. At the same time, it is quite simple to show the difference between legitimate criticism and illegitimate criticism. I use here the model of the “three D’s”: demonisation, double standards and delegitimation. As illegitimate criticism we see – unfortunately, these days, often in Europe – a demonisation of the State of Israel. It becomes a demon that takes measures outside international law and is waging a “war of extermination”. Perfidiously, some even call this “total war” and impose on our country terms that have been borrowed from the Nazis. Thus it becomes a universal demon, to blame for everything. For example: after the last dreadful terrorist attack in Taba in Egypt, newspapers there wrote that the Israelis were responsible for it. They said it had been carried out in order to embarrass the Egyptian security forces and bring the many Israeli tourists holidaying at the cheaper resorts in Egypt back to their own country, which was suffering from a crisis in the tourist industry – another absurd conspiracy theory, a demonisation, far from legitimate criticism. The second touchstone is the double standard. There is one standard for us and another for the rest of the world. Finally, there is delegitimation. This is a relatively new phenomenon, prevalent predominantly among intellectuals like the anti-globalisation activists of Attac. They question the legitimacy of having a Jewish state in the first place. With these three D’s, one leaves the solid ground of justified legitimate criticism. Beyond that, we are also dealing with classical anti-Semitism. Everyone thought that after the Shoah, with all its appalling consequences, people would no longer have to grapple with this in Germany. But obviously this is a case of chronic illness, for which no one has yet found a cure. Viewed historically, anti-Semitism has developed dynamically from religion-based anti-Judaism via social Darwinism, with a lamentable high point in the racist delusions of National Socialism, and now it concentrates on the State of Israel as collective Jewry. But there also exists a dangerous new anti-Semitism in Europe because of its growing Muslim minorities. Not all people who come from Arab states, but the extremists among the Muslims, are today re-importing the anti-Semitism that was previously exported from Europe to the Arab world, with all its clichés and prejudices. Our great worry is that, in the course of time, coalitions will be formed under the motto, “Anyone who is against the Jews and Israel is a coalition partner for us”. In this way, right-wing radicals, left-wing radicals and Muslim extremists could get together. We are already very alarmed by the latest electoral gains by far-right parties in some federal states of Germany. It would be a mistake to play them down. Now, I believe, is the moment of truth for German democracy. If the right-wing radicals act cleverly, sweep their differences of opinion under the carpet and pull together, it cannot, unfortunately, be ruled out that there might someday be a far-right neo-Nazi party in the Bundestag. The established parties and German society as a whole must do all they can in the two years before elections to prevent this development from taking place. It would do immense damage to German democracy and Germany’s standing in the world.

TRIBÜNE: Do you believe that Israel’s long-cherished wish not just to be associated with the EU, but to be accepted as a full member, is hampered by the anti-Israeli mood in Europe?

STEIN: You know, at present we are in a paradoxical situation regarding the Europeans. Our wish is that relations with Europe remain untouched by other problems – even when there are differences of opinion between the European Union and Israel concerning the settlement of the Middle East conflict. We do not want the European Union to take any measures penalising Israel’s conduct, according to the precept, “If you do not follow our policies, we will punish you”. We must be able to live with the conflict without its always being used as a cudgel. At present we would like to institutionalise our relations to the European Union – beyond the Association Agreement of the year 2000. We wish this agreement to be fully implemented. We already find ourselves in a sort of strategic dialogue with the European Union. For example, we are among the few countries that are members of European programmes like Galileo. The Europeans recognise Israel’s achievements in technology and research. Despite our differences of opinion in the realm of politics, we wish to continue to have extensive dealings with the Europeans. Right now we are negotiating a new European Union policy towards neighbouring countries in the wake of its enlargement in 2004. Israel is conducting its negotiations with the hope that we are entering a new stage in our relations.

TRIBÜNE: The sympathies in the EU lie unmistakably on the side of the Palestinians, whereas Israel’s policies find more understanding in the US. That is so, even though employees at CNN, oddly enough, seldom pose critical questions to their Arab or Palestinian interview partners. In doing so, they disqualify themselves as journalists and become accomplices to one of the parties involved in the conflict.

STEIN: I cannot tell you how great the influence of CNN’s one-sided coverage is on public opinion in America. The diverging conduct of the Americans and the Europeans towards Israel would provide ample material for a long lecture. My plea is just this: wherever the media are, they should report the situation in a balanced manner and play their role responsibly and professionally. There must once again be a clear separation between news and editorial coverage, whether by CNN, NTV or any other broadcaster. Journalists should be professional in their reporting. But I have the feeling that, in the case of Israel, that is no longer the case.

TRIBÜNE: Israel and Germany have maintained a vigorous youth exchange programme for years. An honest critical examination of history is possible only when the generations that follow that of the victims and the perpetrators try to reappraise the past together with them.

STEIN: That has been the case up to the present day, and will continue to be so in the coming years. But the great challenge I see is how to continue these projects at a time when one generation is succeeding the other, in times of normalisation. We must manage to fashion a new culture of memory without contemporary witnesses. That is true for both our countries. I have no definite plan on how to do this, but I believe that only getting to know one another personally and speaking openly with each other can help. Unfortunately, nowadays we still treat each other with diffidence. Perhaps it will take years before there are normal relations between Germany and Israel. That is why youth exchange is so important, especially when living contemporary witnesses are no longer among us. Making this shared history a main talking point, discussing it seriously and comprehensively, and examining its consequences – that is the way people should solve problems together.

TRIBÜNE: That is also true in Germany for the dealings between Jews living here and non-Jews.

STEIN: That is, for the time being, a domestic German issue. How the majority of non-Jewish Germans and the minority of German Jews treat each other is one of the questions that have to do with German identity. I am convinced that Germans who look into their own

identity must inevitably also deal with Jews and Israel. In just the same way, Israelis dealing with their identity must inevitably come up against German history. I believe that in this respect we, as Germans and Israelis, share a common destiny, because in our respective cases, each other's identity is a part of our own.

TRIBÜNE: You have been the Israeli ambassador to Germany for three and a half years. It is already your second stay here. Has that changed you, and what have you learned to value especially here? Have you already even become a bit of a "Jecke"?

STEIN: Not necessarily a "Jecke", but what I have learned to value is the German arts and culture. That is what I will remember most when I officially take my leave of Germany. Here in Germany, especially in Berlin, there is a vibrant artistic scene. Many Germans don't appreciate in the least how much culture massive state subsidies have provided for their enjoyment – like that in no other country in or outside Europe. That is something I appreciate very much. In this exciting city of Berlin and everywhere in Germany I use every available minute to take advantage of these cultural opportunities. As to your question about this being my second stay here: all right, I have grown older and this republic has also grown older – age changes you. Since I first came to Germany in 1980, it has changed a lot, in many ways for the better, in others not so much. But this country always remains exciting. No one who is interested in history, culture and scenery could wish for anything better.

TRIBÜNE: Finally, we would like to know who your favourite Israeli author is, and who your favourite German author is.

STEIN: That's a good question. One of my favourite German authors is Siegfried Lenz. Among Israeli authors, I admire Aaron Appelfeldt, who has grappled with the past and the Holocaust like hardly any other Israeli writer, much as Imre Kertesz does. Another favourite author from Israel is Nathan Shaham, whose books have also been translated into German. I especially recommend his novel, "The Rosendorf Quartet".

The conversation was conducted by Otto R. Romberg and Heiner Lichtenstein.

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