

IPCRI and KAS: In Praise of a Tried and Tested Partnership

Opening Remarks by Michael Mertes, Director of KAS Israel, at an event on “Palestinian-Israeli Joint Initiatives for Peace: Past, Present and Future Perspectives”, co-organised by the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s Israel Office (KAS Israel), Jerusalem, October 17, 2012

Dear Gershon (Baskin),
Dear Hanna (Siniora),
Dear Riman (Barakat),
Dear Dan (Goldenblatt),
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends of IPCRI:

A warm welcome to all of you on behalf of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung!

When I started working here in June last year I got the impression that IPCRI and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung can be compared to an old couple: We come from different backgrounds, we know (and tolerate) our partner’s idiosyncrasies and oddities, but this has never prevented us from being happily married for quite some time, and to remain faithful to one another. What ties us together is a heroic *past* of joint endeavours and initiatives – as well as the will to shape a joint *future*.

Today’s event does not mark a silver wedding. I tried to figure out the date when our love story began. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung established its Jerusalem office thirty years ago, in 1982, and IPCRI was founded a bit later. According to my research, it all began in 1997 – when we were still teenagers, so to speak.

It is amazing to see the things that were possible at that time. To give but one example, IPCRI and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung were able to organise a conference in Taba (Egypt) in 1999 on the practical problems of regional agricultural trade between Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, and Egypt. The preceding conference had taken place in Gaza in 1998. All this happened just 15 years ago, but to our ears today, it sounds like tidings from a different era. But let’s not be nostalgic, as old couples tend to be. Let us draw hope and strength from the encouraging experiences we have jointly made.

As someone who has been part of the IPCRI/Adenauer love story for only 16 and a half months, I felt I had to ask my predecessors Dr. h.c. Johannes Gerster and Dr. Lars Hänsel about their reminiscences and views.

My pre-predecessor Johannes Gerster asked me to convey to you the following message, which I am going to read in full length:

“I am sending you my cordial congratulations and blessings on your 25th anniversary,” Johannes Gerster writes. “I keep fondest memories of IPCRI from my nine-year tenure in Jerusalem between 1997 and 2006. Even during the most difficult times of the Second Intifada we managed to bring together time and again important Israelis and Palestinians from politics, the economy, and science in working groups about the Middle East conflict. I keep special memories of our workshops in Antalya, Berlin, Cadenabbia on Lake Como, and Brussels.

We did not negotiate peace – that shoe would have been far too large for us. We struggled for the solution of practical problems with a view to improving the living conditions of people on both sides of the green line. We hoped that the Israeli and the Palestinian governments would take up ideas, proposals and points of view emanating from our working groups, and we enjoyed being successful in a number of individual questions and individual cases.

There are two telling examples showing how we sometimes managed to master even most complicated challenges: Two days after the Israeli Minister of Tourism Rehavam ‘Gandhi’ Ze’evi had been assassinated in the Hyatt Hotel on Mount Scopus we were holding a meeting in the Foundation’s Educational Center on Lake Como. The atmosphere was tense – and yet, Israelis and Palestinians got it together and talked to one another in a sober way. The rational conviction that perpetrators of violence must not ruin dialogue prevailed over understandable emotion.

During another meeting Israeli shelling damaged a production hall in Gaza owned by a participant, Mohammed Yassiki. However, he remained willing to continue his participation. The will to understanding was stronger than the impulse to abandon the conference.

This spirit of persistence, of stamina, of being prepared to start again and again from square one, has been a hallmark of the cooperation between IPCRI and KAS from the outset. Granted, our cooperation has not achieved the great goals to which we aspired – for the reason that the rifts between Israelis and Palestinians were too big. But our working groups were more successful than the opponents of any dialogue would have liked them to be. For that reason alone this kind of work has to be continued.

I thank IPCRI and its former directors Gershon Baskin and Hanna Siniora, as well as Hanna Siniora’s predecessor Zakaria al Qak, for a cooperation that has always been marked by mutual trust.

For the future, I wish IPCRI and its new directors the courage to go unorthodox ways, the strength to tackle the seemingly impossible, as well as good fortune and success. I remain convinced that Israelis and Palestinians can achieve between

themselves what became possible between Germans and Israelis after the Shoah: namely, that the spirit of humanity overcomes the demon of inhumanity.”

Lars Hänsel, my immediate predecessor who is now heading the Stiftung’s Washington office, sends best wishes as well. He writes:

“Dear participants of this important conference honoring 25 years of IPCRI: I would like to send my warmest greetings to you all. In particular I send greetings to Gershon and Hanna, whom I had the honor to get to know as truly relentless advocates for a two-state solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This was not always easy. I remember times when the Oslo negotiations broke down in 2001 and many turned their backs on Israeli-Palestinian projects and gave room to pessimism. IPCRI under the leadership of you both always moved on bringing Israelis and Palestinians together. You worked hard to not only talk about hope but to go very concrete steps. I admired always your focus on practical solutions and your unshakable positive and optimistic attitude, when others would have become cynical and gave up.

You also invested so much of your personal time and energy. You spent so many days, nights and also many weekends not with your family and loved ones, but for the vision of peace between Palestinians and Israelis. If this peace will finally be achieved and historians will have to write the history of overcoming the conflict, I am sure that you both will have a central part in it!

I personally always felt privileged that the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and me personally were involved and could help in some of these important initiatives. I recall in particular the Israeli-Palestinian Business Forum that not only brought together Israeli and Palestinian businesspersons and opened new opportunities for cooperation. It also created a platform to discuss future technologies for green energy.

Hosting a group of businesspersons in Washington DC last year, I was very happy to see that these initiatives, among many others, continue under Riman Barakat’s and Dan Goldenblatt’s new leadership. Also Riman and Dan face tremendous challenges in a time, when many seem to not believe anymore in peace initiatives. I think these efforts are as essential as ever and I wish you all the best for your important work.

Friends of IPCRI, in particular Gershon, Hanna, Riman and Dan: Let me put on record my deep appreciation for your work!”

Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, I could stop here, but I think I still have to make some points myself, some of which will underline what my predecessors have already said.

First of all, I would like to express the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's deep gratitude to Gershon Baskin and Hanna Siniora as well as their most dedicated and competent team. The credit for IPCRI's outstanding reputation on both sides of the green line belongs to you!

Dear Gershon and Hanna, I also have to thank you personally for giving me an extremely helpful basic course in Israeli-Palestinian conflict lore. I have learned a lot from you. And I have felt from the outset that the IPCRI/Adenauer relationship has never simply been a business connection, but something one could call an institutional friendship based on individual affinities.

Secondly, a couple of words about IPCRI. IPCRI is unique in many respects:

- It is one of the very few existing bi-national institutions of Israelis and Palestinians, and it stands alone as a bi-national think-tank. This is an achievement in itself. And it is increasingly becoming a symbol of courage and character at a time when institutions of that kind are denounced as “left-wing NGOs” on one side, and as “normalisers” on the other.
- Furthermore, IPCRI brings together an enormous variety of people. You have a joint board of experienced and well connected Israeli and Palestinian academics, businesspeople, politicians and journalists, and you reach a broad spectrum within both societies.
- A unique thing about IPCRI is also its combination of „thinking and doing“. IPCRI is considered not only a think-tank but rather a „Think- and Do-Tank“. Your work is not limited to develop abstract proposals, but you also take concrete steps to implement ideas and projects. An obituary about the *Bitterlemons* web magazine recently ridiculed the so-called “facts on the ground” as “another catch phrase beloved of Middle East watchers”¹. IPCRI is a Middle East player, not a Middle East watcher, and the “facts on the ground” are what matters in ordinary people's lives.

Thirdly, let me emphasize the importance we – IPCRI as well as the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung – still attach to the two-state solution. President Obama has defined that solution as “a lasting peace [that] will involve two states for two peoples: Israel as a Jewish state and the homeland for the Jewish people, and the state of Palestine as the homeland for the Palestinian people, each state enjoying self-determination, mutual recognition, and peace.”²

It has become fashionable to ridicule the two-state solution as an outdated illusion. “The Emperor Has No Clothes”, as the *International Crisis Group's* Middle East Report of May 7 put it, is one of the milder descriptions of the status quo: The “reason most often cited for maintaining the existing peace process is the conviction that halting it risks creating a

¹ <http://www.opendemocracy.net/rosemary-hollis/importance-of-bitterlemons-obituary>

² <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>

vacuum that would be filled with despair and chaos. The end result is that the peace process, for all its acknowledged shortcomings, over time has become a collective addiction that serves all manner of needs, reaching an agreement no longer being the main one. And so the illusion continues ...³

I am well aware that the two-state solution is under attack from different sides, right-wing and left-wing, Israeli and Palestinian. Very often the distinction between *desirability* and *feasibility* is blurred. I must confess that my initial belief in the *feasibility* of a two-state solution has been shaken by what looks like an irreversible status quo. On the other hand, I still believe – as does the organisation I represent here – in the *desirability* of a two-state solution. This is why I won't give up hope.

I grew up during the Cold War when less and less people believed in the changeability of the European status quo. Look what happened more than 20 years ago when the Berlin Wall came down and the peoples of Eastern Europe peacefully regained their right of self-determination. Or take the most improbable success story of European integration. A European Union seemed to be unfeasible in the 1950s, and during the last couple of years we had to learn that a single European currency is an extremely difficult historic experiment. However, it is hard to deny that the Nobel Committee was right when it selected the EU as this year's Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

My **fourth point** is about successful change of leadership. I must say it is simply admirable how Gershon and Hanna handed over the reins of IPCRI to Dan and Riman. Examples abound where established leaders were unable to release their position to a new generation. The German historian and biographer of Konrad Adenauer, Hans-Peter Schwarz (who happens to be on the board of our Stiftung), once told me he knew of only one head of state or government ever who stepped down from power voluntarily: Emperor Charles V. who abdicated in 1555 and retired to a monastery.

You will probably not find Gershon and Hanna in a monastery, but what they did is almost equally remarkable: While remaining available to Dan and Riman upon need and request, they refrained from interfering in their successors' way of handling IPCRI and in Dan's and Riman's setting up their own roadmap and agenda.

There is a corresponding compliment I would like to make to Dan and Riman: While formulating new visions for a younger generation of Israelis and Palestinians – people who were still children or juveniles when Oslo was concluded –, they do not throw away what they have inherited from Gershon and Hanna; they try to increase it.

This brings me to my **fifth and last point**: I am very much looking forward to cooperating with Dan and Riman – and, of course, their wonderful team. We have already embarked on a promising partnership, and one of the focal points on our agenda will be “green” issues such as energy security, renewables, and water protection.

³ <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/israel-palestine/122-the-emperor-has-no-clothes-palestinians-and-the-end-of-the-peace-process.aspx>

I wonder whether I should wish IPCRI another 25 years. Probably not, because I do hope that a reasonable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – which can only be a two-state solution – will be found much sooner. Paradoxically, the final objective of our cooperation is to make our cooperation superfluous one day. So let us work together to the end that we will live to see the moment when we can say “Mission accomplished!”