

The Middle East as Seen from Middle Europe

Karel Schwarzenberg

Karel Schwarzenberg is the foreign minister of the Czech Republic. This article is adapted from his remarks at a round table discussion at the Israel Council on Foreign Relations on November 26, 2007.

I am very flattered and touched to be introduced here as a true friend of Israel. My personal relationship with Israel began forty-three years ago on my first visit to your country. In fact, my relationship with Israel even predates that visit. The first embassy of Israel to Czechoslovakia was housed in the home of my parents in Prague at 10 Vorsilka Street and I still remember as a child watching the *magen david* being raised over the house in May 1948. That embassy was one of the newborn Jewish state's first foreign legations.

Today I have come to speak to you about the Middle East as seen from Middle Europe. Let us recognize at the outset that our relations with the Middle East are rather different than the relationship between the great nations of Europe and the Middle East. France, for example, sees itself as having a special position in the region; Great Britain, for its part, has traditionally played a special role in the Middle East. Obviously, the role of a small, landlocked country like the Czech Republic is different. That is a simple fact. Many citizens of Israel have roots in my country. They were born there, or their parents or grandparents were born there—some of them are still citizens of the Czech Republic; therefore, our relationship is a special one.

I recently received a delegation of Iranians in Prague and I told them very frankly that we have a special relationship with Israel, special interests with Israel, if for no other reason than the fact that many of our former citizens live there.

Let me speak about the European–Jewish “dual heritage.” Europe as we know it would be unimaginable without the heritage that derived from Israel's three-thousand-year-old traditions. One cannot imagine Europe without the Judeo-Christian heritage. That is especially true of Central Europe. On the other hand, you brought our Central European heritage to this country, and that includes literature, music, coffee houses and other institutions which have made their mark on Israeli society.

Czechs and Israelis share common security problems, heightened as the world has become dangerously small. In our parents' generation, the enemy might have been

sixty kilometers away but our parents had two hours in which to evacuate before the enemy tanks would come. Today, the enemy may be thousands of kilometers away but his missiles can reach us in minutes. The danger is no longer a regional one. Today the whole world is imperiled and all of us share the threat posed by this new and dangerous technological development.

We try to be a good friend to Israel even while maintaining friendly relations with Israel's neighboring countries. But there is one difference: Obviously, we have a different attitude toward countries with which we share common values such as the rule of law, democracy and human rights. We may respect and maintain a relationship with countries that do not share those values but it is a different kind of relationship. I would be very happy if there were more countries in this region with which we could share the same values and if there would be more choices regarding with whom we could have a special relationship.

I believe that what I have said is the general policy of all the countries of Central Europe. Of course, over the course of hundreds of years, our nations have had different histories and traditions.

Concerning our position in the European Union and NATO, we have clear ideas about the policies we would like to see implemented regarding Israel, and we are freer to discuss them as members of a group of small countries. We consider Israel a friend and even in some ways, an ally. That does not mean that we cannot criticize it or disagree with some of its policies. At the end of the day, there are some nations in the EU that may be more pro-Israel or less pro-Israel, but all of the new members especially share with Israel many fields of common interest and mutual benefit.

With respect to Israel's relations with NATO, there are many common interests and values which we have to defend together. Obviously, great powers have more influence than states the size of the Czech Republic. On the other hand, we are not afraid to raise our voice and sometimes we can influence them.

Regarding NATO, there are two scenarios to be considered. Either the organization can work as a buffer between Israel and its neighbors, in which case it must be neutral. In that case, Israel could not join the body. In fact, Israel's membership would even strain relations, as NATO would have to strive towards impartiality. On the other hand, if an agreement were to emerge between Israel and the Palestinians, the skeptical voices about Israel's membership would be stilled and Israel would probably be able to join. Given the present circumstances, however, there are obviously many questions regarding Israel's accession to the body.

To put it bluntly, although some NATO member states would be in favor of Israel joining, the majority would not want to become more involved in what it sees as the Middle East quagmire, which would strain their forces. Lamentably, we are in a different position than the states which control their own oil and gas supplies.

Of course, and this is speculation, there could one day be another solution and that is a situation in which Israel, Jordan and perhaps the future Palestinian state would all be asked to join NATO. The discussion is open; however, at present, it must be understood that many in NATO would not want Israel to join without even a single Arab state joining as well.

With respect to EU foreign policy, it must be recognized that the weight of German, French and British influence, and, to a lesser extent, Italian and Spanish, is decisive. With the new Reform Treaty (Lisbon), perhaps a unified EU foreign policy will finally emerge. Even with the accession of the new members of the European Union, the old status quo still prevails. For the most part, the majority of the important civil servants in the EU still come from the "old states" and that fact is reflected in practical policy. In the beginning, nobody gave any consideration to what we, the new members, had to say.

EU funds have often been abused and have even disappeared. Today we have to be much more careful. We have aided the Palestinians and will continue to do so as long as they are in distress. We have, for example, developed our own electrification program in Tubbas, near Jenin. If you are young, intelligent and unemployed, you get silly ideas. Wherever there is unemployment, you will have great problems.

Of course, we also have to look at developments in the former Soviet Union. The Soviet period is over and also ended is the time that followed it when the Russians' own internal problems precluded their involvement in the international arena. Today Russia is full of money. Russia is on the ascendant. I had the honor and pleasure recently of hearing Mr. Putin speak. Pleasure, because I am sentimental for the period of my youth and was reminded of the old days. Putin wants to achieve the position that the Soviet Union once enjoyed in Europe, if not the rest of the world, and believes that if the EU does not accept Russia as its equal in Europe, there will be problems. Putin has a brilliant foreign minister who is an efficient diplomat. To be sure, our bilateral relations with Russia are not bad. Our exports are flourishing and the Russians reliably supply us with oil and gas.

When thinking of Russia, I am reminded of the famous story dating back to the sixteenth century when Ivan Grozny sent a letter to Queen Elizabeth suggesting that they establish direct relations and that their commerce be carried out

directly—that is to say bypassing the Hanseatic ports. Everything went smoothly. English linen found its way to Moscow and Russian furs were sent to London, until one day Ivan Grozny wrote a letter to Elizabeth in which he said, “Until now, I have spoken with you as an equal. But I am now told that you have to discuss your policies with the peasants of your country. Therefore, I understand that you are not really the sovereign of your country and not really my equal.”

With respect to the recent headlines about a neo-Nazi demonstration in Prague, the fact is that our generation is much to blame for this phenomenon. When we were young, all existing taboos—sexual, social and religious—were broken down. Nothing is considered sacred or sacrosanct any longer, and nothing shocks or surprises us. That includes attacks on religion. The one taboo that still does exist is the Shoah and the memory of the Nazi period. On the part of youth, there is always the temptation to provoke and to shock. The truth is that the young people have little or no idea about Nazi times or the real meaning of the swastika, which is why they behave the way they do. To a certain degree, we play their game. Individuals who choose to use the Shoah or the swastika as a provocation will see themselves on television and in newspaper headlines. The membership of these neo-Nazi groups in the Czech Republic probably does not number more than a thousand people, but every day for a whole week, they were on television and in the newspapers. For a youngster, especially one from a small town in the provinces, that sudden fame is very alluring. Of course we have to let the police do their work, but at the same time, we have to be careful not to give these misfits too much publicity.

Collective memory obviously evolves from one generation to the next. That is especially true of prejudices. The Czech Republic is today in a very similar phase to what Germany and Austria underwent in the 1950s and '60s. It is a time of *Wirtschaftswunder*. People have new cars, new or renovated homes and vacations in Italy and Tunisia on their minds. For the moment, the forty-one-year communist era is not on the agenda. One day, that discussion will start again but we must take into account that most of the population, at least those in the over-fifty category, were somehow involved with the old regime. If you wanted to survive, you had to be. Whole families were divided on that basis. There were very few people who were untouched or untainted by any involvement in Communism. That, of course, has a sobering effect, and if you judge others, you will be judged by others. The masses, therefore, do not think about the past and see no need to discuss it. They may say to themselves, “I once signed something. I hope that nobody finds out.”

The period of the Nazi occupation is even more distant. Those who remember it are between eighty and the grave. There is a certain discussion about the past and

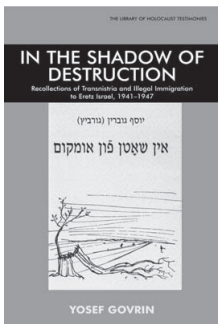
the problematic chapters in Czech history, for example, how widespread was the collaboration with the Germans. This is a discussion that is carried on in limited circles. It is all the more important because many of the criminals of the Nazi period seamlessly merged into the new totalitarian system after the end of the war. However, it is certainly not a burning issue.

The Germans are today the biggest investors in the Czech economy. People are happy about the success of the Skoda car company which, under efficient German management, employs thousands of Czechs. Prejudice is on the wane. If, in Munich or Nuremberg, the activities of the revanchist German *Landsmanschaften* once garnered front page headlines, today the cause is relegated to the back pages.

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