



Ohad Shem-Tov's GLP Address to the General Assembly of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

Shalom,

It is my great pleasure to thank the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, and especially our friends, Marco Pannella, Marco Cappato, Marco Perduca, Sergio Rovasio, and Sharon Nizza for their gracious invitation to the GLP to participate in this momentous conference.

Last year, the GLP established a concerted dialogue with the TRP in order to elicit common values and declare mutual support for the promotion of these values in both Europe and the Middle East. Our conversation today marks another positive step towards Israel and Europe promoting common ideals and making them a reality.

Following last year's GLP decision to promote the concept of Israel joining the EU in its platform and domestic activities, we have done our best to promote this idea among our supporters and the Israeli public. In interviews with the media, we publicly acknowledged our membership in the TRP and our support for Israel's becoming a complete member of the European Union.

When the opportunity of Israeli membership in the EU is proposed to Israelis, there are many skeptics, and their usual reaction is that there is no chance that Europe will accept Israel as long as the conflict in the Middle East goes on. When the discussion develops, questions about the potential influence on Israel's identity and independency arise. Nevertheless, I estimate that if Israel

will be invited even while the Mideast conflict continues, and if the Israelis realize that there is no threat to the Jewish character of their country, the support for this move will be ecstatic. Right now this vision looks like a wild dream for some, but if we act efficiently and effectively, in just a few years we'll be able to ratify the dream of us being one community. Because one community we are.

Israel's relationship with Europe is so far-reaching, that if I tried to summarize it, I would transgress to a common history and culture that is inextricably intertwined for over thousands of years. Even geographically, our relation with Europe began with the expansion of the Roman Empire, the exile of the Jews – mostly to Europe, and the various conquering rulers of our land for all the centuries since then, up until the reestablishment of Israel 60 years ago. As for today, the living standard in Israel is equal to that of European countries and Israel fulfills the economic, social, political and other criteria for joining the European community. A community of nations that redeem themselves from their shameful historic sludge and try to shape their future based on progressive ideals of equality, liberty and welfare for all individuals. I believe that overcoming the awkward historic relations with the Jewish people can be a critical step, constituting the culmination of that process.

It's not a secret that Israel is an unusual state. It was founded in the Middle East, but in terms of regional organization it doesn't formally belong to any place. From a scientific or ideological perspective, it is not similar to any other state in the region. Israel's economy is part of the globalization, and the Israeli society is western. By the Arabs, Israel is grasped also as an ally of the west in the political sense.

However, the western world, and especially Europe, is based on Christian history, that was established with the claim that the Jews lost the right to sovereignty from the time they rejected Jesus. According to this logic, the establishment of the state of Israel stands in contradiction to the very principles of Christianity. Therefore, Israel, according to the Christian perspective, is not a normal country, and its legitimacy depends on its actions

and on the degree to which the Christian world is ready to accept Israel's policies. Consequently, unlike any other countries, where criticism is directed against the current governments, criticism against Israel goes deeper. Criticizing the policy is often, in actual fact, thinly veiled criticism against the existence of the state. We see an expression of this masked approach in the academic boycott that recently declared against Israel and the Israeli people by British academia. Such a boycott was not declared against any other country and people in the world, in apparent disregard to the severity of the ongoing human rights violations and unjust suffering in many countries.

On the Other Hand, Islam saw itself as the successor of both Judaism and Christianity. According to the Islamic Theology, a Jewish sovereignty is unacceptable, especially not in the land that was once the heart of "DAR AL-ISLAM" (the Islamic sphere). The Jews are known as the murderers of the prophet, since there is a claim that the Jews poisoned Muhammad. There is a comparison between the modern state of Israel and the ancient Crusader kingdom. When the state is defined as a religious entity, the conflict between its existence and Muslim values escalates. It makes the conflict much more difficult.

In order to change the existing reality, the historical roots of the way Arabs perceive Israel must be fully understood. As I mentioned earlier, the Arabs compare between the state of Israel and the Crusaders kingdom. On the 15th of July 1099, The Crusaders conquered Jerusalem while massacring more than 20,000 of its inhabitants - Jews and Muslims alike. Within 10 years, the crusaders established a kingdom in the land of Israel. After 50 years of separation among the Muslims, they began to unite around the concept of Jihad (Holy war). in 1169 Saladin took power in Egypt and began to attack the Crusader kingdom. His actions were interpreted mainly as a display of force for show, but from 1183 his attack took a more intense and aggressive turn. Their peak came in 1187, in the Battle of Hattin, in which the crusade army was defeated. After 88 years of Christian rule, Jerusalem fell to the hands of Saladin.

Meantime, western culture went a long way, while monarch apprehension was replaced by ideas of individual rights, democracy and free market. Above all, the culture allowed us to understand the similarity and the difference of "the new age", where global culture meets the multicultural world. The victory of America and its European and Japanese Allies in the Cold War led to dominance of the capitalist liberal model in the world economy and politics. In other words, the global order is being shaped by liberal values that are not dependent on territory.

As a response to the challenging modernism, various reactionary elements appeared. It seems that all the revolutions shared a common hatred of the west. Capitalism was grasped as corrupt and exploitative. The same elements turned usually to religion for the sake of acquiring power. Just as the Marxist revolutionaries tried to rebel in the 50's and the 60's against any liberal idea, the religious militias ever since the 70's led the revolutions.

The Islamic revival was triggered by a clash with modernization. The exposure of the Arab countries to the global economy during the 70's deepened the crises. Influenced by the globalization, the secular elites who were supposed to care for the public turned to the west and to the modern lifestyle and abandoned their people, who remained poor. That allowed the opposition in those countries to lead resistance not only against their own elites, but also against the globalization itself. A violent militant behavior used as an effective tool by the political opposition in the Middle East. That's how Said Kutav in Egypt and Humeini in Iran have acted. Militant Islam sees the salvation in its history. It puts the Kuran and the Islamic law above everything else. They perceive democracy as a foreign concept and they follow anachronistic law, where people can be easily executed, women are discriminated against, as well as non-Muslims.

In August 1996, the leader of Al-Qaida, Osama bin-Laden, issued a FATWA (Islamic law) and declared war on the United States and Israel. In that document, the term "Zionist Crusaders Alliance" is mentioned 10 times. This terminology serves Islamic extremists well, since it assimilates naturally into

the collective consciousness of the Muslims, and takes it to the next stage, the creation of a pan-Arab nation.

The actions of the fundamental Islamic flow are "taken for granted" in Arab society. Otherwise, we would assume that the society would reject them from within. For many, it's a repetitive historical scene. For westerners, it's hard to realize exactly why those paths are chosen, since seemingly they lead to self-destruction. The western confusion derives from crucial cognitive gaps with Islamic culture. Those gaps are caused by varying intersubjective interpretations, in different cultures, of the same reality.

Europe's historical and moral obligation is to clarify that the perception of Israel as a temporal religious and colonialist phenomenon is a false view that fails to advance an anti-Israel agenda on the one hand, and doesn't affect Israel or Israeli policy, on the other hand. In order to do so, it's necessary to become familiar with the development of the existing peace process, and to reshape it, so that eventually, the threat to Israel's existence will be removed once and for all.

The peace process between Israel, Arabs in general, and the Palestinians specifically, is maneuvered in the last decades, by players who seek a whole-frame-contract solution that relies on broad compromises between the overarching conflicting ideals of the divergent groups in the region. We, in the Green Leaf Party, believe that such a compromise is not possible as long as these societies are almost completely disconnected from each other.

The conflict between Israel and the Arab world can be solved, we believe, if the Middle East undergoes a process of accepting the reality and compromising on unrealistic fantasies, in a similar vein as Europe's acknowledgment after WW2. Since Israelis accept the right of the Palestinians to exist and their right to establish an independent state for the first time, the first compromise must come from the Arabs, who must stop blaming Israel for its existence and for every other problem.

In Europe there is no understanding why Israel can't simply decide to end the occupation in the territories. The European lack of understanding derives from different interpretations. For Europeans, the narrative of occupation is associated with their colonialist past, and they are unable to identify themselves with the intense Israeli feeling of vulnerability, resulting in the conquering and holding of territories from 3 countries that attacked Israel 40 years ago. Israel's recent moves, such as the disengagement from Gaza, the withdrawal from southern Lebanon and the repetitive attempts to make peace with the Palestinians and allow them to establish an independent state in those territories, prove that Israel doesn't see those territories as hers. We believe that if Israel becomes a full-fledged member of the EU, the security interest of the European states will become identical to the interests of Israel, and therefore Israel will be ready to hand over the responsibility for those territories to a shared European retainer.

Europe emerged from a quagmire of security issues and was thus able to develop and advance because the EU promotes the common economic interests, but also the unique interests of each one of its member states. The individual interests of the countries were always the center of the integration process. The EU would not be possible without a similar economic infrastructure in the founding states. Reaching that level was possible thanks to strong American support and dominance between the 50's and the 70's of the last century. The GATT regime, a strong flow of new technologies, the Marshal plan and Breton-Woods agreement that determined the principles of America's responsibilities in Europe. We are certain that Europe today can do for the Middle East what the U.S. did for Europe 50 years ago.

Like most European countries, Israel is a parliamentary democracy. Our young generation shares a common culture and constructs the reality by actual deeds. Israelis and Europeans travel together in the Far East and South America, share strong economic ties, visit each other and experience similar lifestyles. Like the past, the present and our future are communal. Inviting Israel to be a member in the EU will officially anchor that recognition. I believe that if Israel will be invited to join the union, a public debate will begin

in Israel which will last for years, but the invitation alone will increase the Israeli sense of security and will motivate its neighbors to abandon the path of hostility towards her.

Israel can contribute tremendously to the EU. The integration in the Israeli society, that includes about 40% of immigrants from the Arab countries, can be used as a model for similar successful integration in the European Union. Israel is second in the world only to U.S. in its high-tech industry. Israeli participants in the Erasmus plan for student exchanges in Europe will strengthen the integration and lead to increasingly fruitful research and advancement in the scientific fields, so vital to all of our futures.

In order to avoid any Arab claims that such an invitation "reveals" their claim about a Zionist Crusader Alliance, we believe that the Palestinians must also be invited to the community, and that the Palestinians and Israelis should jointly petition the Arab league to accept Israel as a member. The special relations between Israel and the U.S. shall not be broken. Today, Israel has free trade agreements with both the EU and the U.S. -- and this shall be changed. Those are just a few examples of the complex issues that have to be sorted out if we're going to make this dream come true, but for now we all have to strive for public awareness of the urgent necessity of Israel becoming a member in the wider European community.

Thank you very much