

# Speech at the Solidarity Rally for Israel on Saturday, 04 November 2023 in Heppenheim a.d.B.

By retired pastor Ulrich Schwemer

## Personal

I visited Israel for the first time in 1964, when I spent seven months there and encountered a lively, vibrant country that was hungry for life and Jewish people who saw themselves as pioneers of a new, democratic state.

But I also met Arab people who now found themselves in a Jewish state and who had experienced how the neighbouring Arab states actually only pursued their own interests and gave the Palestinians no prospects. And they didn't give the refugees any prospects in their respective countries either.

But I also met an infinite number of traumatised Holocaust survivors who had had to fear for their lives twenty years earlier in Hitler's Germany, who had experienced the traumatic struggle for the establishment of the state of Israel only fifteen years earlier and who had to learn that there were again calls to destroy the Jews, this time demanding that they be chased into the sea.

## Current

And today, the trauma of the Holocaust is returning.

The bloodlust of the Hamas murderers, to which over 1,400 people, mostly civilians, fell victim, and the kidnapping of over 200 people in the Gaza Strip, bring back old traumas of the extermination of the Jews by the National Socialists. And the horror of this is abysmal.

There are people who cheer this massacre on the streets here and in other countries, who parrot Hamas slogans about liberating the "occupied territories". Hamas, however, is not a liberation movement, but a brutal terrorist group.

Apart from the unspeakableness of cheering such a massacre, against whomever:

Do they all know what they are saying?

By "occupied territories", which in their view should be liberated, they do not just mean the territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Rather, they are calling for the so-called "liberation" of the entire territory on which the state of Israel was established. In other words, the demand to chase the Jews into the sea is repeated. It calls for the annihilation of an entire people.

That would then be a dimension that is truly comparable to the unfathomable Holocaust.

## **The history**

That is why it is right and proper that Germany is clearly on Israel's side, declaring the right of the State of Israel to exist to be integral to Germany's official policy.

This means that positions that question Israel's right to exist are not compatible with our country's self-image. After all, Israel is a state recognised under international law, although its borders were originally defined much more narrowly and accepted by Israel when they were finally drawn after the armistice in 1949. Then there was an armistice line, the so-called "Green Line", which was valid until 1967. If the Arab states had not hoped at the time to be able to destroy this nascent state immediately, but had accepted the UN partition plan, the current situation would probably not have arisen. The people would have been spared much suffering and bloodshed.

## **Search for peace**

Unfortunately, we have seen time and again in the past that potential peace initiatives have been thwarted on both sides of the conflict. Time and again, the extremists on both sides passed the ball to each other and consistently prevented paths to peace, right up to recent times.

The deepest cut and perhaps the beginning of the path to today's seemingly hopeless situation was probably the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin on 4 November 1995, 28 years ago today.

Two years earlier, on 13 September 1993, Rabin had shaken hands with Yasser Arafat in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington and said: "We who have fought you Palestinians say to you today in no uncertain terms: enough blood and tears have been shed, enough is enough!"

There were fierce clashes in Israel. Rabin dolls were burned during demonstrations in autumn 1995. Benjamin Netanyahu was at the forefront of this protest movement.

<https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/ermordung-von-jitzchak-rabin-es-wurde-genug-blut-vergossen-100.html>, download 01/11/2023).

Netanyahu is credited with saying that a strong Hamas is the best guarantee to prevent a two-state solution. Unfortunately, we are now experiencing the consequences of this position, which can also be found among the settler groups in the West Bank, who are aggressively obstructing and ignoring the rights of the Palestinian population.

## **The result**

However, a strong Hamas can also carry out the most brutal murders and deeply traumatise an entire Israeli society.

And this fact will lead to questions being asked of the government, which lulled itself into a false sense of security, instead indulging in a country-dividing dispute over the legal foundations of this very state and apparently ignoring warnings from intelligence sources.

The victims of this misjudgement are the inhabitants on the edge of the Gaza Strip who were brutally murdered and the young people who simply wanted to enjoy their lives at a big party and who are now dead.

Words cannot adequately describe this. The suffering that these people and their loved ones had to and still have to endure leaves one speechless. Even the few images of the massacre that were shown on public television are almost unbearable. Such boundless hatred on the part of those who murdered here leaves us speechless. Where can words be found that point the way to peace? Or is there only sheer hatred left?

And yet, there are people in Israel who do not retreat into their anger and despair, who even now still try to treat each other humanely.

## **Attempts at trust**

Some initiatives are facing up to the reality that so many people have had to leave their homes at Israel's borders. The Leo Baeck School in Haifa initially took in groups of pupils who were unable to return home from their excursions in order to provide them with material and psychological support. Over the course of the crisis, the school also arranged accommodation for families to give them a roof over their heads.

The Neve Hannah children's home in Quiriat Gat, which is located 25 kilometres from the Gaza Strip, learnt that a former pupil who grew up in this home was also among the young men murdered at the rave party. The children's home nevertheless maintains its contacts with the Bedouin families, with whom it has been cooperating for many years in various projects under the heading "Path to Peace".

The Leo Baeck Institute in Jerusalem, which actually endeavours to preserve the German-Jewish cultural heritage, is now working with psychosocial institutions to provide a kind of first aid for traumatised victims of this barbaric attack on unarmed civilians.

The organisation "Rabbis for Human Rights" is maintaining its contacts with Arab people in the West Bank and continues to support Arab families with the olive harvest these days, because these people are repeatedly attacked by aggressive Jewish settlers.

## **Consequences**

What can we do here in Germany?

The images of the war, the many victims that are now also being mourned as a result of the Israeli attacks, lead to premature identification with one side or the other. Our solidarity with Israel is necessary, Israel's right to exist must not be called into question and we must take a clear stance here. Nevertheless, we must scrutinise Israeli decisions that consciously or unconsciously undermine peace initiatives and question democratic legal principles.

On the other hand: Identifications with the Palestinian side in this country are all too often coloured by antisemitic narratives, which then also threaten Jewish people in our country.

We have to take a clear stance against this, without forgetting the suffering of the Palestinian population.

It must remain clear at the end: There is no excuse whatsoever for the bloody terrorist attack by Hamas. Murder cannot be the response of a movement that supposedly stands up for the rights of its own people, but ultimately abuses the civilian population for its own purposes. For this act has not only brought untold suffering to people in Israel, but also to the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip.

And there is no excuse for that!