

Focus

Persevering for Peace: a conversation with Hans-Gert Pöttering

"Hope and optimism are part of our lives"



"Understanding between cultures is crucial for world peace"

We met Hans-Gert Pöttering to talk about how Parliament can contribute to peace in the Middle East and the role to be played by fostering intercultural dialogue.

Your first official visit as President was to Israel, Palestine and Jordan. Do you believe that post-war European reconciliation can offer any hope or lessons for the people of the Middle East?

We were very successful in Europe after the Second World War in bringing peace to what is now the European Union. Some say that this European example cannot be an example for other parts of the world. My question is: why not? There were once wars between the peoples of Europe in almost every generation, but we finally learned the lessons. This should be possible in the Middle East as well. Our great ambition must be that both Israel and the Palestinians can live in safety, develop good relations, identify common interests and build a partnership together.

It is our responsibility to do our utmost to support dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis. Of course, all the countries in that region have to be involved - including the whole Arab world. Our American friends are working for this, but we Europeans must not leave this to them alone. We should be more engaged: not only by giving out financial aid, but being decisive in promoting the peace process in the Middle East. This is one of the great challenges for 2008, which is also year of dialogue between cultures.

Your activities indicate that you believe the European Parliament has an important role to play in the world's efforts at peace and reconciliation in the Middle East and wider the neighbourhood. What special influence do you think the Parliament can bring to bear?

It is vital to speak to the people holding responsibility: politicians in Israel, politicians in Palestine. Many EU officials are doing this: Javier Solana (EU High Representative foreign affairs) and the European Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

The leaders of the political groups in Parliament recently accepted my proposal to invite the President of Israel, Shimon Peres, to come to the Parliament next year. We have also decided to invite Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestine Authority. So hopefully both of them will come. We also invited the Grand Mufti of Damascus, Dr. Ahmad Badruddin Hassoun.

These are just a few of those we are inviting to a conference in the European Parliament early in 2008, in which Tony Blair, with his responsibilities for the Middle East, will also participate. We hope this way to make our contribution to the peace process.

Also in 2008 we plan to organise an "Arab Week" and events to celebrate 60 years of the State of Israel. We want to invite young people from Israel and Palestine and bring them together with young Europeans, to help them develop an understanding for each other. Such steps help build confidence and the wider peace process.

Next year will be the year of Intercultural Dialogue. You have said this is central to your mandate. Why is this theme so important for you?

Understanding between cultures is crucial for world peace. In particular, relations between the Western world and the Arab and Islamic world will be decisive for the 21st century. It is my deep belief that terrorism should not have the chance to take root. Some terrorists claim that they use force because Islam teaches them to do so. This is not acceptable, for Islam is in itself a peaceful religion.

I never forget the speech to the European Parliament made by the late Egyptian leader Anwar Al Sadat, in which he powerfully made that point: that real Islam is a religion of peace. We must take our opportunity to connect with people of good will in the Islamic world. If we do, the "clash of civilisations" some predict cannot happen. It is thus our responsibility to develop this dialogue, which must however be based on mutual tolerance and truth. It cannot be a one-way street.

Sometimes there seems little cause for hope. Are you optimistic that things can really change for the better?

Have you ever seen a pessimist win through in the end? We have to be optimistic. As a Christian, I say hope and optimism are part of our lives. You can only be successful and achieve your goals if you believe in them. Take the European integration process. I have had the privilege to be in the European Parliament since 1979. At that time many people would never have thought that Europe would be reunited, that we would have a strong European Parliament, a strong European currency - yet we have achieved all this. Not in one week, but through hard work, good will and the cooperation of others. So I am optimistic that we will be successful as far as the dialogue of cultures is concerned.

Further information

- Israel-Palestine: Parliament suggests future steps: 26 November 07
- MEPs debate situation in Middle East: 19 June 07
- Mr Pötering takes peace message to Israeli Knesset: 30 May 07
- Watch his speech to the Israeli Knesset (download)
- Remarks by President Pötering at a Conference "Towards a Renewed Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process: The Role of Europe": 3 May 2007
- [2008 Year of Intercultural dialogue](#)
- Euromed

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