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Yoav Sivan Private Photo

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Eventful trip to Germany

PM Olmert's Berlin visit produces more headlines than expected

Yoav Sivan

Even well known facts can make the headlines. It happened twice last week: In Tehran Iranian President Ahmadinejad's contesting the obvious, namely the existence of the Holocaust, brought about international condemnation; in Berlin Israeli PM Olmert's admitting what everybody had already known, Israel's nuclear capacity, made a big fuss at home and abroad.

Iran's openness about its willingness to gain nuclear capacity to change the future of the Jewish State, coupled with its attempts to rewrite the Jewish people's history, are always embarrassing for Germans in particular.

The political burden of history is heavy enough, and is only exacerbated when an Israeli PM comes over for a short visit. No wonder then that leading lawmakers of the ruling Christian Democratic party (CDU) competed with their partners to the Grand Coalition, the Social Democrats (SPD) in clarifying again the ongoing commitment of Germany to the security of Israel and to the memory of the Holocaust.

Mr. Olmert's slip of the tongue, mentioning Israel as one of the world's nuclear powers, occurred in an interview to a German TV program. But it caused a commotion in the hosting country only after Israel's Channel Two signalled out at home the acknowledgement of the bomb as a possible change in the Israeli policy of nuclear ambiguity.

German media quickly followed suit, and then Mr. Olmert was challenged on his own words, and the nuclear attention was shifted from Iran to Israel, much to the dismay of the Israeli delegation.

Mr. Olmert's rescue came from Tehran. Indeed, he should thank the timing of the eccentric convention there, as conveniently it helped tame any political pressure that might have been applied on him.

Moreover, since the visit of the Israeli PM and the Holocaust denial convention in Tehran both occupied the front pages of all important newspapers, it actually made clear why Israel needed a nuclear arsenal to begin with, regardless of whether its existence is admitted or not. When Mr. Olmert's political savvy in handling strategic affairs is questioned, President Ahmadinejad still excels as Israel's best advocate in explaining our security needs.

Dr. Jörg Bremer, the correspondent in Israel of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, a leading German Newspaper, does not read too much into Mr. Olmert's stating the obvious regarding Israeli nuclear bombs. The visit was planned already in the summer and the meetings followed the agenda that had been set.

Even if Mr. Olmert's unwitting expression might have received attention, the main political topics of interest for Germans remain Iran's nuclear program and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Dr. Bremer believes the German public feels that even if the

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German minister's visit to Damascus

Although the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats alike readily share the commitment to Israel's security, when you scratch the surface you could find differences in the parties' positions on how to support it.

Chancellor Merkel (CDU) is perhaps more cautious in advocating an active German role in the Middle East than the SPD would be. It was Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier of the SPD who recently visited Damascus. Jerusalem openly criticized the visit, a fact that was accepted with surprise in Berlin, partly because it was not clear what diplomatic goal Israel meant to achieve by its open and direct criticism.

A high-ranking SPD official believes there is more to the open Israeli criticism than meets the eye. Although it is directed at Berlin, the message is aimed also at Washington after the release of the Baker-Hamilton report.

The Iraq Study Group suggests diplomatic means to stabilize Iraq go through engaging its neighbouring countries, including Syria. Hence, Mr. Steinmeier's visit to Damascus signals to Jerusalem the weakening of the anti-Syrian front, which thus far was shared by both America and the EU.

Mr. Steinmeier chose to go to Damascus shortly before Germany takes hold of the presidency of the EU and the G-8. Jerusalem was concerned it heralded the acceptance of Syria in the Union, especially since it was supposedly advocated by Germany, the usual pro-Israeli indicator in European politics.

Germans, on the contrary, would rather emphasize that the visit took place deliberately when Berlin has not yet assumed an official leading position: Starting January such a visit would be too sensitive and hence not likely to happen.

European peace intentions make Israel nervous. One recent example: Israel was quick to renounce the Spanish initiative introduced by PM Zapatero a few weeks ago, instead of waiting till it would die away because of lack of European support. The visit to Berlin is a careful check-up that the German players are not running too fast without coordinating with the Americans first.

Five hours of discussions in two separate meetings between Chancellor Angela Merkel and PM Olmert indicated clearly that Berlin is still the most welcoming capital for Israeli politicians in continental Europe, a European version of Washington in which an Israeli PM is always welcome, no matter what party rules in Berlin or in Jerusalem.

While an Israeli PM in Berlin will open the local news editions, for better or worse this is not necessarily the case in other places. Mr. Olmert left Berlin directly for Rome, where the Italian media hardly took a notice of an Israeli politician who pays a visit but does not carry any political message.

The first part of the journey to Berlin was influenced by the political existence of the Holocaust (in Tehran) and nuclear weapons (in Israel). But the second part in Rome shows the following question is not so easy: How to promote Israeli interests abroad when the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is non-existent?

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[Back](#)