

“Turkey is ‘Central’ for Europe”

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Interview: The former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer recommends an end to the isolation of Syria and suggests harder measures in dealings with Tehran.

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Die Presse: Two weeks ago the esteemed liberal *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman advocated that the US leave Iraq, but increase its efforts in Afghanistan.

Joschka Fischer: In my opinion, it will come down to two things in Afghanistan:

Whether a strong, democratically legitimate central government will be able to take control over the entire country? The second point concerns the structure of regional security: Without a regional security consensus the danger of destabilization attempts is too great.

Die Presse: How should the international community proceed with regard to the nuclear crisis in Iran? Should we just accept that at some point the regime in Tehran will have the bomb?

Fischer: I still see possibilities in our dealings with Iran, but that would require a strategic reorientation on the part of the United States. This would mean that on the one hand one would really aim towards isolation and containment, but on the other hand that one is open to direct talks. However, I do not foresee this as a viable option at the moment.

What do I mean by containment and isolation: In the region there are factors that speak in favor of isolating Iran. There is a deep resentment on the part of the Arab governments towards Tehran’s hegemonic ambitions. Aside from Hezbollah, Syria is Tehran’s only ally. I believe it would be smart to formulate a policy which strengthens isolation – as long as Iran is pursuing destabilizing policies in the region and as long as there is no agreement on the nuclear question. At the same time, however, one needs direct talks in order to affect change in these areas.

Die Presse: What role should Syria play in this regard?

Fischer: A decisive one. But bargaining with Syria only makes sense if one takes the question of regime change off the table and if Israel is willing to seriously discuss the return of the Golan Heights. Such a step would cause a positive change in the strategic situation in the region. Secondly, it makes sense for the US to open direct talks with Tehran. Certainly, talks are initially never of great significance. It is positive and important that one open talks. But one must know about what one is talking and which levers one can apply. However, time is running out for the US considering the situation in Iraq.

Die Presse: In Iraq the US is stuck in quicksand. Do you see even one single option that will not lead to a catastrophe?

Fischer: The options are all on the table, but I can hardly see a positive one. This was the foreseeable consequence at the time when the US decided to go to Baghdad. Under the pressure of mobilizing ~~of~~ all of their forces and facing high losses, they are just barely able to maintain a very low level degree of stability. But this is not a steady state. The US will have to either decisively escalate the conflict militarily – but I do

not think the US Congress or the public is willing to do so. Or the United States will tire in their stabilization efforts – and then what?

The greatest challenge will then be to see whether the consequences of an imploding Iraq can be confined to the territory between the Euphrates and the Tigris. These are just words, but they conceal a dire outlook for Iraq and the population in the region.

Die Presse: The US Middle East expert Richard Haass caused a stir with an article in the foreign policy magazine “Foreign Affairs” when he announced the end of American dominance in the Middle East. Is this the consensus among the circles of experts?

Fischer: Haass says that the domination of the US, which began with the successful liberation of Kuwait in 1991 – brought about by an international alliance under the leadership of the father of the current US President - is now ending in the fiasco surrounding Iraq. The time in which the US had the sole say in the region is over in his opinion. One thing should be clear: If the US reduces its role there, the Europeans will not be able to quietly leave the region. One needs only to look at a map.

At a time, in which it is becoming increasingly clear, that our security is being decided in the Middle East, we are affording ourselves – in my opinion – an incredibly short-sighted debate on the issue of Turkey. Turkey will be central to European security. Whether Turkey will ever become a full EU member, I do not know. That will be decided in the next 15 to 20 years, by which time Turkey will – hopefully – be a worthy candidate for accession. But what I do know today is: we Europeans have an existential interest in seeing that Turkey successfully modernizes and that the country is deeply anchored in the EU – whether or not one is in favor of full membership or not.

If the transformation of a large Islamic society were to be successful, this would be an important signal to the entire region. It would show that it works. It would show that there is an alternative to fundamentalism.

Die Presse: It is unrealistic to want to solve the problems of the Middle East without speaking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But the prospects there seem rather grim.

Fischer: Aside from the special historical responsibility of Austria and Germany with regard to Israel, the Europeans will quickly discover that aside from Turkey, Israel is also of great significance in regard to their [European] security. We must take an interest in assuring a two-state solution. It is in the existential interest of Israel that the border questions with Syria are solved. In the end it will come down to the border of 1967 – possibly with some compromises on the straightening of borders. This has all been negotiated X many times – it is the most thoroughly negotiated, but still not agreed upon peace treaty in history.

Die Presse: What do you think of the European accusations that the US is taking great liberties in regard to human rights (laws?) in its ‘war on terror’?

Fischer: The US accusatorily always retorts: “Easy for you to say. We are also creating security for you.” The loss of moral high ground has certainly hurt the West. The US has done itself, as well as us, a great deal of harm. We are fighting not only for our security, but also for the security of free societies in general, for the rule of law and for the upholding of basic rights – despite, and indeed especially because of the fact that we are under attack.

Die Presse: But that also bring about the accusation of double standards: On the one hand, Europe is blaming the US because of Guantanamo and the abduction of suspects, and on the other hand European governments are willingly collaborating with the US. You too, have been personally criticized in this regard...

Fischer: Young man, hold on, hold on, hold on. None of this concerns me personally. What does concern me personally, that I will also vouch for. Not that we get any false connotations in this interview.

Die Presse: Chancellor Angela Merkel prides herself in having freed a German suspect for whom the former government had not really engaged itself.

Fischer: First of all, I never heard it in those terms from her, because she knows that, secondly, this is simply not true. This is all being thoroughly debated and I have no problem with this to be sure. By the way, I would also like to retort: when Ramzi bin al-Shibh and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed were arrested, did the media ever ask what happened to them? Did you personally ever ask?

Die Presse: Mea culpa.

Fischer: Why not? Why didn't you ever ask? Ask about that!

Die Presse: At that time we did not ask and that was an omission on our part. You are right. Today it is different. The question remains: How can we deal with terror without putting our liberal society on the line?

Fischer: Thank God it is all different today. If a confrontation – provoked by a terrorist – were to come to the tipping point of 'us versus Islam' then we would lose. Rather, it is in our interest that a sort of Euro-Islam prevails. This however will require that we take a clear position in regard to our own values, as I do not believe in a sort of value-relativism. Neither do I believe in either arrogance or standoffishness towards Islam. It is in our interest that Muslim societies take a path towards modernization. We should make sure that these societies find the appropriate support on this path and that we do not push them back – possibly directly into the arms of the extremists. For example, a placard that states "Daham statt Islam" [Austrian dialect: 'home instead of Islam'] as was posted during the elections here in Austria is simply unhelpful. It completely contradicts the Austrian tradition. During the Habsburg dynasty Islam was recognized. This great tradition should not be forgotten because it is highly modern and an example for modern Europe.