

Germany is trying to prevent Palestine's unilateral proclamation of independence

Artur Ciechanowicz

On 13-14 June Guido Westerwelle (FDP), the German foreign minister and Dirk Niebel (FDP), the minister of development co-operation went to the town of Benghazi, which is controlled by Libyan rebel forces, and to Israel and Palestinian territories. It seems that Germany is trying to negotiate the question of the proclamation of Palestine's independence between Israel and the Palestinians. It is interested in the proclamation not being unilateral and being based on a compromise negotiated with Israel.

The deadlock in Palestine

The main target of the visit to the Middle East was Israel and preventing Palestine proclaiming a unilateral declaration of independence, which may occur as soon as in September. In the same month the UN general assembly will be held. In this forum the Palestinians intend to request recognition of their state comprising East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. If the vote was held today, approximately 100 countries would recognise Palestine's independence. This would be not only the "traditional anti-Israel majority" but probably also Spain, Ireland, Norway, France and the UK. France and the UK make their vote contingent on the concessions which Israel and Palestine will make in order to try to resume peace talks. Since the end of September 2010 Palestine and Israel have not been holding official peace negotiations. The direct reason for breaking off the talks was the fact that Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, did not extend the freeze on building settlements on the West Bank. Germany fears that Palestine will be another block in the domino effect of the Arab revolutions. In the worst-case scenario this could end – in Germany's opinion – in another armed conflict.

Only in agreement with Israel

At the press conference held after the meeting with Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian Autonomy's prime minister, in Ramallah on the West Bank, Westerwelle announced that according to Germany, a unilateral proclamation of independence would be an inappropriate solution and could lead to an escalation of violence. At the same time he pointed out that "unilateral decisions" also refer to Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. In the view of the head of German diplomacy the current impasse between the Israelis and Palestinians, particularly in the context of revolutions in Arab countries, may prove very threatening. In

exchange for Palestine's abandonment of the plan to announce independence, Germany could endorse an alternative resolution of the UN Security Council which stipulates the establishment of two states within the borders of 1967 (despite the fact that Jerusalem is opposed to it). This would however not be recognition of Palestine's independence but an instrument for exerting pressure on Israel. Westerwelle is also determined to see the meeting of the Quartet on the Middle East composed of the US, Russia, the EU and the UN organised soon. He is however sceptical of the French proposal to organise a large Middle East peace conference in Paris by the end of July. According to Westerwelle, such a conference would only make sense if "there was a real chance of progress".

On the one hand, Germany's efforts are aimed at preventing the Palestinians from unilaterally proclaiming independence. On the other hand, through a possible resolution of the UN Security Council on the borders of 1967, Germany wants to push Israel to soften its stance on the potential borders of the Palestinian state and to urge Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to resume talks. Germany's position is convergent with the letter of the head of EU diplomacy Catherine Ashton addressed to the secretary general of the UN Ban Ki-moon, the American secretary of state Hillary Clinton, and the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. In this letter Ashton called for a meeting of the Quartet on the Middle East and stated that unilateral gestures were a mistake.

The evolution of Germany's policy towards Israel

Germany's policy towards Israel is shaped not only by political and economic interests but also to a large extent by history. Germany still emphasises its responsibility for the Holocaust, which compels it to maintain relations with Israel at a "special" level. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1965, subsequent German governments – irrespective of political orientation – have sought to forge closer ties with Israel. German politicians continue to stress that the existence and security of Israel remains the constant foundation of German foreign policy. This premise is explicitly included in the programmes of the CDU, SPD, Green Party and FDP.

A characteristic feature of the policy pursued by Merkel until 2009 was the adoption of the Israeli point of view in issues relating to the region and the tendency to ignore the opinion of EU countries. During her visit to Israel in 2006 Angela Merkel took a stance on Hamas that was almost identical to that of Israel. During the war in the Gaza Strip at the turn of 2008 and 2009 the German Chancellor again took sides with Israel by accusing Hamas of escalating the violence. One of the signs of warm relations between the two countries was the launching of intergovernmental consultations in 2008. Israel was the first country from outside Europe that was offered a joint session of governments by Berlin.

In March 2009 however relations cooled, which was caused above all by distrust of the new Israeli right-wing prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In March 2010 Angela Merkel joined the Barack Obama administration in criticising the plans to develop Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories. On 18 February 2011, Germany backed the resolution of the Security Council that qualified Jewish settlements in the occupied territories as "illegal". The resolution was not adopted only because of a US veto. Germany is therefore becoming more and more critical of Israel's position on Palestine.

On 5 May at the press conference with Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Autonomy, Merkel underlined that Germany would recognise Palestine's independence only when the Palestinian state would be established in agreement with Israel. Nevertheless, two weeks later she expressed support for Barack Obama's proposal of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through the creation of two states within the 1967 borders.

The declaration of Palestine's independence and putting this question to a vote at the UN General Assembly would confront Germany with the necessity to make a clear-cut choice: in favour of Israel and against Palestine or in favour of Palestine and against Israel. However, Berlin wishes to avoid such a situation. For this reason it is trying to press both Israel and Palestine to resume peace talks. The issue of the vote at the UN General Assembly will then become irrelevant.