

What do the German Election Results Mean for Israel, Europe, and the Peace Process?

Summary of a policy roundtable of the Mitvim Institute and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

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On 27 September 2017, the [Mitvim Institute](#) and the [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung](#) held a policy roundtable on the German election results and their impact on Israel, Europe and the peace process. The roundtable commenced with remarks by former Ambassador Shimon Stein, former Member of Knesset (MK) Nitzan Horowitz, Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Dr. Gisela Dachs, Dr. Werner Puschra, and Dr. Nimrod Goren.

Ambassador (Ret.) Shimon Stein, Israel's former Ambassador to Germany, stated that the election results represent change rather than continuity. According to Ambassador Stein, the results compel Germany and Chancellor Merkel to deal with key challenges such as the refugee crisis and deep social divides, which were among the reasons for the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. In his opinion, Merkel is now expected to build a coalition with the liberal party (FDP) and the Greens, but such a coalition may encounter difficulties and not survive the full term, eventually leading Germany to an early election.

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu from the Hebrew University and the Israeli Association for the Study of European Integration (IASI), noted that the election results continue a trend of strengthening of the populist far right in Europe and indicate to the European Union's leadership that despite escaping the eye of the storm, the wave of crises of recent years has not ended. According to Dr. Sion-Tzidkiyahu, although the next coalition will be pro-European, the election results may make it difficult for Merkel and French President Macron to jointly promote a comprehensive vision for the European Union. Yet, it is likely that following the formation of the coalition in Germany the Franco-German axis will continue advancing the process of European integration.

Dr. Gisela Dachs of the Hebrew University pointed to the ongoing weakening of the largest and the oldest parties in Germany. She suggested that a similar process takes place also in Israel and in the rest of Europe, stemming, among other reasons, from desire and need for something new. She noted that many of the voters of the AfD vote for the party as a form of protest, rather than out of identification with its values or platform. According to Dr. Dachs, AfD voters come not only from the weaker sectors of the German society and the periphery, but include also members of the middle class who wanted to punish Merkel for positions that they considered too leftist.

Dr. Werner Puschra, Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Israel, analyzed the decline in power of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which lost votes even among its traditional strongholds (such as labor unions) and ran a campaign that did not adequately address the needs of the voters. He underscored the gap between the deep economic inequalities that exist in Germany and the perception in the German political system that the country is in good economic shape. According to Dr. Puschra, the SPD should now present the public with an alternative, a vision and concrete goals, in order to bring back ten million voters who left it since 1998.

Former MK Nitzan Horowitz, a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute, discussed the tightening links between Israeli right-wing elements and European far right parties, based on shared interests and values. According to Horowitz, this relationship serves both sides: European far right parties gain legitimization stemming from their ties with Jewish and Israeli elements, while Israeli right-wing elements identify the European right as potential supporters of the occupation and the settlements. In his opinion, Israel should avoid association with the far right parties in Germany and in other European countries.

Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of the Mitvim Institute, pointed to the intensification of the German criticism of the Israeli government's policies, both with regards to the Palestinian issue and the state of the Israeli democracy, suggesting the criticism is likely to continue also after the election. He noted that Israel is adopting an increasingly confrontational approach towards Germany, which harms a relationship that is crucial for Israel. Dr. Goren argued that Germany could realize its ongoing support for the two-state solution by supporting pro-peace civil society organizations, taking independent diplomatic initiatives, and supporting the consolidation of common European positions.