

## Fifty years of German-Israeli diplomatic relations: whither the miracle of reconciliation?

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# Fifty Years of German-Israeli Diplomatic Relations

Whither the Miracle of Reconciliation?

*Muriel Asseburg*

The 12<sup>th</sup> of May 2015 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the inauguration of diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Israel. While Germany's genocide of the European Jews means that these will never be normal relations, the anniversary sees leading representatives of both countries lauding the almost miraculous bond of trust and close web of contacts that have grown between them. And indeed, with no other country in the Middle East is Germany so closely associated. Nevertheless, reconciliation has remained largely a project of the elites, and the two societies are currently growing apart rather than together. Also, differences over a two-state settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are casting a heavy shadow over the relationship. Germany's political elite and society should therefore take the anniversary as an occasion to reflect on the meaning of Germany's historical responsibility and the implications for its policy towards Israel.

After the rupture in civilisation of the Shoah it appeared unlikely that Germany, as the "country of the perpetrators", and Israel, as the "country of the victims", would ever come to any kind of closer cooperation. Indeed, in the 1950s there was resistance, above all but not exclusively in Israel, to any rapprochement of the two young states. Yet from the outset, relations were not shaped only by the past: While Germany's special responsibility for the state of Israel has dominated the public discourse, cooperation has in reality always been driven by mutual economic and security interests. Since the establishment of

diplomatic relations German governments have worked to deepen ties in the political, economic, military and social spheres. The relationship was initially exclusively between the Federal Republic (West Germany) and Israel, as the German Democratic Republic refused to accept responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime. Reunification then made the Federal Republic's the only German policy towards Israel.

## Close Bilateral Cooperation

Today the close relations are best expressed by the joint cabinet meetings held alter-

nately in Berlin and Jerusalem every year or two since 2008. Aside from Israel, Germany holds comparable regular top-level meetings only with its closest European partners, as well as Russia, China, India and recently also Turkey.

The last government consultations in February 2014 produced, amongst other understandings, a consular agreement allowing Israeli citizens to seek assistance from German representations in countries where Israel has no diplomatic or consular presence. The two countries also agreed to expand their joint development projects in sub-Saharan Africa, above all on agriculture, water and desertification. Israel, which itself received German development aid until 1996 and only joined the OECD in 2010, has recently become a partner for Germany in this field. Although its technical expertise in the water sector is undeniable, Israel's discriminatory water policy in the occupied territories speaks against such cooperation, as it leaves the amount of drinking water supplied to the Palestinian population well below the minimum recommended by WHO. Israel thus violates the human right to water and its duties as occupying power.

### **Trade, Military and Armament Cooperation**

Trade relations are close albeit asymmetrical. In 2014 Germany was Israel's fourth-largest bilateral trade partner, while Israel was forty-sixth of all Germany's trade partners and third in the Middle East (by volume). An especially brisk trade has developed in the field of armaments, profiting from the close cooperation between the two countries' defence ministries, armed forces and intelligence services.

On the one side, Germany possesses a strong interest in Israel's high-tech arms industry, in particular its drone technology. Since the 1990s Germany has leased unmanned aircraft from Israel to deploy in former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. In joint training and exercises German interest con-

centrates on profiting from Israel's practical experience in military counter-terrorism, in particular house-to-house fighting.

On the other side, Israel was the third-largest recipient of German arms exports between 2009 and 2013, with missile defence systems and submarines especially prominent. Germany donated two submarines free of charge and sold the others at a considerable discount or in exchange for arms purchases in Israel. The fifth of currently six contracted submarines was launched in April 2013 and is likely to be delivered soon. The German government has justified broad subsidies for arms deliveries in terms of its commitment to Israel's security, originally in light of German support for Iraq's missile and arms programmes and Iraqi attacks on Israel in 1991, later increasingly with reference to the Iranian threat. Germany also possesses an interest in placing orders for its own arms industry and shipyards.

Although these arms exports contradict the principle of not exporting to regions of tension, they have been justified under the "if it floats it's OK" rule attributed to former Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. This was shorthand for exporting defensive weapons systems seen as unsuited for repression in the occupied territories. This reading ignores, however, the possibility of using submarines for offensive purposes, such as landing commandos, as well the aspect of proliferation, to which Germany contributes by supplying carrier technologies. In fact, Israel has converted its submarines to enable them to fire cruise missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Although one could argue that Germany makes a decisive contribution to Israel's security by supporting its seaborne second-strike capability, this capability actually risks escalating tensions in the region – especially in view of Israeli threats to conduct military strikes against the Iranian nuclear programme.

## **The Politics of Societal Reconciliation**

Alongside a number of civil society actors, the German government has led the way in promoting relations also at the level of society through a great diversity of exchange and cooperation programmes. Various projects largely initiated by the German government (as well as a few bilateral foundations) play an eminent role, focusing on exchange and cooperation by politicians, academics, businesspeople, journalists and artists. For more than fifty years the German Federal Agency for Civic Education has been running Israel visits for opinion leaders. More than one hundred German towns and districts are now twinned with Israeli counterparts. Since the 1950s about 700,000 young Germans and Israelis have participated in youth exchanges or voluntary service (mostly Germans going to Israel). Currently about nine thousand school students and young adults participate in such exchange programmes each year.

### **Normalisation and Criticism**

Despite all these initiatives, German-Israeli relations have remained largely a project of the elites. Apart from those directly involved in exchanges, they have had little effect on the two societies, certainly a good deal less than the media. They have thus made only a small contribution to mutual understanding, still less to a reconciliation of perspectives.

Germans and Israelis have drawn very different lessons from history. Put simply, in the country of the perpetrators the motto “Never again war!” has been translated into a political culture of military restraint, multilateralism, and relinquishing of sovereignty. The land of the victims, following the dictum “Never again Auschwitz!” has placed its faith in resolute independence, military strength and nuclear deterrence. These approaches have been further reinforced by the respective geopolitical environments. It is therefore no surprise

that there is estrangement and incomprehension between the two countries’ populations.

At the same time perceptions of the respective other have changed considerably over the past decades. Broadly speaking, Israelis’ views of Germany have become more positive, Germans’ ideas about Israel more negative. Still, comprehensive studies based on opinion surveys reveal a less dramatic picture than that suggested for example by anti-Semitic incidents in several German cities in connection with the 2014 Gaza War, or emerging from single-issue polls, especially when conducted at times of war.

Germans perceive Israel largely in the twin contexts of the loaded German past and the Middle East conflict. In contrast to their political elites, growing numbers of ordinary Germans refuse to treat their country’s historical responsibility as a duty to ensure Israel’s security. Rather, they see German history implying a special responsibility to protect human rights and to engage to prevent war. In a Bertelsmann study published in spring 2015, only 40 percent of those surveyed agreed that Germany bore a special responsibility towards the Jewish people. About two-thirds – and almost 80 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds – expressed resentment at still being held responsible for the crimes against the Jews. Drawing a line under the past is favoured by 55 percent of Germans. In contrast, almost three quarters of Jewish respondents in Israel believe that Germany continues to have a special responsibility towards the Jewish people, and 77 percent reject drawing a line under the past.

Germans have long ceased to regard Israel as the underdog David threatened by an overpowering Arab Goliath, as was still the case during the 1967 war. Israeli policy towards the Palestinians meets with particular criticism by Germans, who blame Israel at least as much as the Palestinians for the lack of progress in the peace process and recurrences of violence. Israel’s use of force is often perceived as disproportionate.

At the same time there is little regard for Israel's difficult security environment.

In this context Germans are also critical of their own government's policy towards Israel. While politicians across political parties again reflexively took the side of Israeli in the last Gaza War in July/August 2014 and emphasised its right to self-defence, almost two-thirds of those interviewed in August 2014 by ARD DeutschlandTrend held Israel and Hamas equally responsible for the escalation. A large majority also held that Germany should remain neutral rather than taking sides. According to the aforementioned Bertelsmann study, a clear two-thirds majority reject arms deliveries to Israel.

On the other side, a study by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation from January 2015, based on surveys among Jewish and Arab Israelis, shows that more than two thirds of Israelis have an overwhelmingly positive perception of Germany. Among young Israelis, whose image of Germany tends more to the negative than the average as a result of a school curriculum in which Germany is discussed almost exclusively in connection with the Shoah, there is paradoxically currently a Berlin craze. And even if most Israelis continue to associate Germany with the Shoah, they also see it as a stable Western democracy with a reputation for innovation, high-quality products and good quality of life. Eighty percent of the surveyed Israelis regard Germany as an important partner, and almost 60 percent believe that Israel can rely on Germany without reservation. Consequently Israelis also wish for Germany to play a more active role in international politics. But here their expectations are diametrically opposed to those of the Germans, as they would like a more active Germany to take Israel's side in conflicts with the Palestinians and Iran, to stand up for Israeli interests in the European Union and international organisations, and support Israel with arms supplies.

### **Societies Drifting Apart**

Demographic trends suggest that the two societies are likely to drift further apart with regard to politics and identity. Germany is today more strongly marked by generations and population groups that have no personal connection to the Shoah. Still, no significant increase in anti-Semitism can be identified in Germany over the past ten years. Also, the popular view that Muslim immigrants were responsible for the anti-Semitic incidents in summer 2014 is not backed up by the statistics. While anti-Semitic slogans heard at demonstrations against the Gaza War came from these quarters, the vast majority of anti-Semitic crimes are clearly attributable to right-wing extremists.

Israel, in turn, is today noticeably less characterised by Jews who have immigrated from Europe than it was during its early years. And the proportion of religious Jews in the population is increasing, that of secular Jews declining. In 2010 every third Israeli child was born to an ultra-Orthodox family. This also generates challenges for Israeli democracy, associated with the spread of the conviction that Jewish law (halakha) stands above democratic principles (in general or at least in particular spheres).

These developments are also likely to deepen the polarisation between Jews and Arabs in Israel, which has already been exacerbated over recent years by legislation designed for example to strengthen the Jewish identity of the state. Not only do the ultra-Orthodox argue significantly more frequently than others to restrict the political and economic rights of Arab Israelis. Also, a national-religious discourse asserting a claim to Greater Israel has increasingly taken hold, reaching even into parts of the population that do not regard themselves as religious. Today almost one quarter of the Jewish population backs such ideas.

The correlation between religiosity and image of Germany is likely to be a factor affecting relations between the two societies. This is reflected in the study by Kon-

rad Adenauer Foundation, where 77 per cent of secular Jewish Israelis have a positive image of Germany, but only 42 per cent of the Orthodox and no more than 31 per cent of the ultra-Orthodox. Thus the two societies will probably show ever decreasing mutual interest while irritations are likely to increase.

### **Tense Relations**

Despite close bilateral cooperation, the political relationship has been characterised by tensions between the Merkel and Netanyahu governments. The two heads of government and their advisers have repeatedly had heated telephone exchanges, and the German Chancellor has openly criticised Israeli settlement policy – although only after US President Barack Obama led the way.

Twenty years after the Oslo Agreements between Israel and the PLO (1993–1995) there is great frustration in Germany's political elite about the impasse in the peace process, for which they hold Benjamin Netanyahu largely responsible. Ongoing settlement activities in the occupied territories had eviscerated the credibility of the Israeli prime minister's 2009 commitment to a two-state settlement long before his July 2014 announcement that there would be no sovereign Palestinian State. His March 2015 election campaign statements merely confirmed what was already evident.

Berlin has thus found Israeli policy to be increasingly in contradiction to its own understanding, according to which Israel's security would be best served by a two-state agreement with the Palestinians, a comprehensive peace settlement with its other Arab neighbours, and regional cooperation. Since the beginning of the 1990s Germany has been actively supporting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the multilateral Middle East talks, and EU initiatives aiming to integrate Israel into an ever closer web of Euro-Mediterranean relations. Since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority

in 1994, Germany has been one of the largest donors to the Palestinians, who also receive the highest level of per-capita German aid and development support. As well as supporting the peace process, Germany has seen the establishment of Palestinian state institutions as the main priority.

Yet it can no longer be ignored that support for the peace process and the Palestinian Authority have contributed not to resolving the conflict but to cementing a conflictual status quo. De facto Israelis and Palestinians have not moved an inch towards a two-state settlement. Instead a one-state reality has consolidated in which Israel maintains almost complete control over the entire region between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan, where residents enjoy different rights depending on citizenship, place of residence and ethnic/religious categorisation. The Palestinian Territories are fragmented by settlement construction, the separation barrier in the West Bank, the sealing off of East Jerusalem and the blockade of the Gaza Strip, while the political rift between Fatah and Hamas further undermines their unity. Despite immense donor support over the past twenty years, sustainable economic development has proved impossible, above all because of the ongoing occupation.

### **Constants and Gradual Change in Berlin**

The German government still adheres to most of the constants that have characterised German Middle East policy since the early 1990s, in particular continuing to insist that any resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be an outcome of direct bilateral talks. And it continues to regard the United States as the main power broker and moderator of such negotiations. Berlin also regards pressure on Israel as counterproductive, preferring instead positive incentives, and rejects so-called unilateral steps (Israeli settlement activities, Palestinian internationalisation efforts) as harmful to the peace process. In addition, Chancel-

lor Angela Merkel feels a very personal obligation to Israel's well-being and understands its security as part of the German *raison d'état*. She thus also complied with Netanyahu's demand to recognise Israel explicitly as a Jewish state even though such an ethnic/religious definition of identity excludes the country's non-Jewish citizens (who make up about 20 percent of the population).

The lack of progress in the peace process has, however, brought about a gradual change in Berlin's policy. Germany no longer operates as "Israel's good ambassador in the European Union", upon which Prime Minister Ehud Barak was once able to rely. While Berlin is by no means the driving force behind an increasingly Israel-critical stance within the European Union, it does find itself more in the mid-field of European positions. Germany has repeatedly attempted to generate joint EU positions, but has also ceased seeking to prevent European moves that Israel regards as punitive. This applies for example to the suspension of an upgrading of the European Union's relations with Israel (that Germany had supported and that had in principle already been adopted in 2008) after the 2008/2009 Gaza War, the adoption of EU guidelines forbidding as of 2014 the funding of Israeli institutions and activities in the territories occupied in 1967, or the request to the European Commission to prepare guidelines for the labelling of settlement products.

Berlin has also come to the conclusion that international parameters for conflict resolution would be helpful for encouraging constructive and goal-oriented negotiations. Together with the United Kingdom and France, Germany presented such parameters to the UN Security Council in February 2011, but was unable to have them adopted against US rejection. Berlin did not, however, support a draft Security Council resolution introduced by Jordan in December 2014 stipulating an end to the occupation by the end of 2017, as the German government still rejects any binding timeframe or coercive measures, let alone an internationally imposed settlement.

The sharpest expression to date of German dissatisfaction with Israeli policy remains its abstention in the vote on accepting Palestine as a "non-member observer state" at the United Nations General Assembly in November 2012. This move marked a dilution of Berlin's position on recognition of Palestine. At the same time Germany continues to insist that a Palestinian state must emerge from negotiations and makes recognition dependent on that.

### **Perspectives**

The bilateral relationship is likely to come under further pressure in the coming months, as the chances of resumption of a meaningful peace process are nil, especially after the March 2015 Israeli parliamentary elections. Already since the last round of talks was broken off in April 2014 the parties have been pursuing unilateral steps and Israeli-Palestinian relations have steadily worsened. This trend is set to continue. As a consequence the international isolation of Israel will also increase – and with it pressure from European partners on Germany to take a clear position and support a more resolute European line towards Israel.

### **Recommendations**

Seventy years after the liberation of Auschwitz and fifty years after the establishment of diplomatic relations, Germany and Israel have every reason to celebrate the reconciliation of their states. At the same time Germany should see the anniversary as an opportunity to stage a debate about its historical responsibility and to critically reassess its policy towards Israel. For neither at the political level nor the societal can German-Israeli relations be isolated from the Middle East conflict. The following elements should be taken into account in this reflection process:

**Special historical responsibility:** A broad social and political debate is needed to clarify which specific obligations and policies for society as well as domestic and foreign

policy ensue today from Germany's historical responsibility.

**Expansion of exchange and education programmes:** In view of the drifting apart of the two societies it would be useful to pay greater heed to today's social reality in exchange activities and include segments of the population that have tended to be neglected (immigrant groups in both societies and non-Jewish minorities and the religious sector in Israel). In Germany more consistent action must be taken against anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia through civic education and rigorous judicial prosecution. At the same time, dialogue forums that bring together population groups with different religious affiliations should be supported.

**Engagement in crisis management:** The realisation of historic responsibility in foreign policy should be based on an empathic understanding of Israel's threat perceptions, but not on unquestioning adoption of Israeli security doctrines. Germany should fulfil its responsibility by expanding its involvement in regional crisis and conflict management. This is all the more urgent as Israel finds itself in an extremely fragile environment with great risk of violent escalation on several fronts. In the past Germany has offered its services to mediate prisoner exchanges between Israel and Hezbollah or Hamas, and it would certainly make sense to employ the trust gained through such activities to prevent future military clashes.

In the same vein, Berlin and its European Union partners should engage actively for a resolution of the conflict over the Gaza Strip, rather than relying on Egyptian or other initiatives. One obvious starting point would be the German foreign minister's proposals of summer 2014, including a deployment of EU monitors to overcome the blockade and create the preconditions for reconstruction, economic activity and a decent life in the coastal enclave.

**General principles of German policy:** Even in its special relationship with Israel, Germany's actions should be guided by respect

for human rights, observance of international law and preference for peaceful conflict resolution. Double standards – for example supplying weapons that serve offensive as well as defensive purposes or joint exercises where German forces seek to profit from Israeli experience in the context of the occupation – must be avoided. Policy fields where Israel violates human rights in the Palestinian Territories should be excluded from development cooperation projects.

**Active commitment to the two-state settlement:** If Germany is committed to the existence of Israel as the state of the Jewish people, there is no point continuing a policy that indirectly consolidates the illegal occupation and prevents a two-state settlement. The approach pursued to date, that conflict resolution must be the outcome of bilateral talks between the conflict parties, has proven ineffective. Germany and its partners in Europe and in the Middle East Quartet (United States, Russian Federation, United Nations, European Union) should therefore agree not only on a Security Council resolution detailing parameters for a two-state settlement but also to stipulate a binding timeframe and provide a mechanism for internationally supervised implementation. At the same time a good deal more effort must then be put into keeping open the option of a viable Palestinian state, for example by insisting on a settlement moratorium. Recognition of a Palestinian state would also be consistent with that policy.

Unless such a commitment, in which confrontation with Israel is unavoidable, is pursued energetically, a two-state settlement will become ever more elusive. In this case serious consideration must be given to alternative approaches to safeguard the rights of all the inhabitants of the area of the former British Mandate of Palestine, even if they are incompatible with the national ambitions of Israelis and Palestinians.

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