

Working Paper

Research Unit Middle East and Africa
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs



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German-Israeli Relations: Achievements and Challenges for the Future

(Presentation given at a workshop on “40 years of diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany: Past, present and future” organized by the German and the Israeli embassies in Kopenhagen, 6 June 2005)

Working Paper FG 6, 2005/03
June 2005
Berlin

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Introduction

This meeting takes place as one in a whole series of events in Germany, in Israel, and elsewhere, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. And indeed there is good reason to celebrate. In the light of the horrendous crimes committed during the Shoa, there was strong resistance to and heated debate about the engagement in formal mutual relations in both countries in the 1950s and 60s. Against this backdrop, we have come a long way and the relationship has made much progress during the past forty years: Today, Israel and Germany have „special relations“, meaning that the relationship is especially sensitive, especially burdened, but also, especially friendly. Still, I would prefer to say that the two countries are bound by „unique relations“¹ – unique in the sense that they are built on the horrific crimes against humanity committed by Germany during the so-called „Third Reich“: the systematic murder and planned extinction of European Jewry.

In reflecting on this relationship, I would like to focus on its main features in the present, the achievements that have been made but also some worrying tendencies and the challenges that lie ahead. I will do so from the perspective of a German researcher, not an official; and I will also offer some recommendations as to where we should go from here to further strengthen the relationship.

Looking at German-Israeli relations today, we can distinguish three main areas of cooperation: political-diplomatic relations (including security cooperation), societal relations, and economic relations. Let me begin with the last, and arguably least problematic area, that of economic cooperation.

German-Israeli Economic Relations

Over the past decades, there has been a steady increase in trade and economic cooperation between the two countries, making Germany Israel's second most important bilateral trading partner – after the U.S. –

¹ See Silvan *Shalom* / Joschka *Fischer*, Israel and Germany. A 40-year Friendship, in: Haaretz Internet Edition, 18.05.2005; „Es fehlt die Empathie. 40 Jahre deutsch-israelische Beziehungen. Israels Botschafter Schimon Stein im Gespräch mit der IP“, in: Internationale Politik, 60 (Mai 2005) 5, p. 102-105.

today. Even though Israel ranks 40th among Germany's trading partners, it is second only to Saudi-Arabia in Germany's trade relations with the Middle East.² The trade volume today amounts to some 4.4 billion US \$ annually, but it is somewhat imbalanced: while Israeli exports to Germany account for about 1.3 billion US \$ of total trade, German exports to Israel amount to 3.1 billion US \$. As for the structure of trade, it is remarkable that agricultural goods, which in the past were the bulk of Israeli exports to Germany, only make up about 10 per cent today, the bulk of trade and cooperation nowadays taking place in the high tech sector, for instance in communications and information or in aviation.³ Investment is also on the rise, with more than forty Israeli companies today being based in Germany, and Israeli investment in such projects as the Rostock port, but also in real estate and the hotel sector. German investment in Israel is mostly located in the high tech sector. In addition, there is a (largely secretive) cooperation in the arms sector. This cooperation in armament is clearly dominated by both sides' interests in technological development as well as economic and financial interests.⁴

In sum, Israeli-German economic relations constitute a positive development. Still, they could be much enhanced to the benefit of both sides. Economic relations would be boosted by progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process: Only in the absence of violent confrontations will German investment in the region grow considerably. And if, in the framework of a regional peace settlement, there were open borders between Israel and its neighbours in the Middle East and a single business location could serve the entire region, many German firms would prefer to serve the region

² Indeed, leaving oil imports aside, Israel is Germany's most important trading partner in the Middle East.

³ There is a lively technology transfer between Israel and Germany. For instance, Audi, Mercedes, BMW, Volkswagen, Siemens, BASF and EADS use the Software of the Israeli Enterprise Tecnomatix. On the other hand, in 2004, Germany delivered vehicles for 390 million US \$ to Israel. Volkswagen, Siemens, Henkel, Deutsche Telekom and SAP all invest in Israel. See Grisha *Alroi-Arloser*, Checkpoint, Aladdin, Magic Software und andere. Die aktuellen Handelsbeziehungen zwischen Deutschland und Israel, in: Das Parlament, 11.4.2005 [<http://www.das-parlament.de/2005/15/Thema/>].

⁴ For details see Otfried *Nassauer* / Christopher *Steinmetz*, Die Goldene Hochzeit der Waffenschmieden, in: Das Parlament, 11.4.2005 [<http://www.das-parlament.de/2005/15/Thema/>].

from Israel. A peaceful development in the region is in Germany's interest for another reason. Even though Germany has diversified its oil imports over the last decades – depending nowadays mainly on imports from Russia, Norway and the United Kingdom – and derives only about one fifth of its oil from the Middle East,⁵ the Gulf states control 63 per cent of world oil reserves and have a major influence on world oil prices.⁶ Good, friendly relations with the Gulf countries and other Arab oil producers therefore are important for Germany, and they would be much facilitated by Arab-Israeli peace.

German-Israeli Societal Relations

There is a dense network of societal relations between the two peoples today. To name just a few examples: There are more than 100 twinning programmes between cities and counties. German tourists make up close to 10 per cent of tourists travelling to Israel. There are exchanges between churches, unions, parties, sports clubs, museums, academic institutions, etc. Indeed, cooperation between research institutions and universities is particularly close, and youth exchange programmes are especially lively. About half a million young Germans and Israelis have participated in such programmes, among them many volunteers working in Israeli social projects, memorials and Kibbuzim. Some of these projects constitute an alternative to military service in Germany that is followed by about 150 draftees per year.⁷ Definitely, Germany does not have societal relations as close with any other country in the Middle East, and even in comparison to German relations to other regions and countries, it can be upheld that the density of contacts and exchanges is unique – with the exception of relations with France and, lately, Poland.

⁵ Currently, Germany gets about 23 per cent of its oil imports from Middle Eastern countries, mainly from Libya, Saudi-Arabia, Syria and Algeria. See website of the German Federal Office for Economy and Export Control [<http://www.bmwa.bund.de/Navigation/root,did=63554,render=renderPrint.html>].

⁶ For a more detailed analysis see Uwe *Halbach* / Friedemann *Müller*, *Persischer Golf, Kaspisches Meer und Kaukasus. Entsteht eine Region strategischen europäischen Interesses?*, Berlin: February 2001 (SWP-Studie S1/2001).

⁷ See Rudolf *Dreßler*, *Gesicherte Existenz Israels. Teil der deutschen Staatsräson*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, (2005) 15, p. 3-8.

At the same time, a change in perception with regard to Israeli policies can be observed among the German public – particularly if we look at attitudes during the past years of violent conflict in the Middle East that have led to a rather high degree of alienation. To cite but one prominent example, in an opinion poll conducted by the European Union in October 2003, 65 per cent of German respondents identified Israel as a threat to peace in the world.⁸ The results shocked the political establishment both in Israel and in Germany. They were not only a reflection of the Middle East conflict's strong presence in the German media, but also telling with regard to the German public's critical stance towards Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories.⁹ The violent confrontations that have occurred during the second Intifada have led to public opinion as well as the media in Germany being much more critical of Israel and of Israeli policies than during the years of the peace process. However, this does not mean they are automatically more pro-Palestinian or pro-Arab.

Arguably, this general shift in opinion is not entirely novel but has been observable during the past decades with sympathies for and criticism of Israel rising and falling in relation to developments in the Middle East – such as the occupation, wars, invasions, etc. – but also to developments in Germany itself. Linked to these waves, there has been a recurring debate among different sectors of the German public about whether Germans have a right to be critical of Israel, or whether they should support it regardless of its policies.¹⁰ Obviously, a settlement of the Middle

⁸ On average, 59 per cent of the European (EU 15) respondents believed that Israel presented a threat to peace in the world - with a range between 48 per cent of Italians and 74 per cent of the Dutch being of that opinion. Among the European respondents, 53 per cent found Iran, North Korea and the USA to be a threat to peace, followed by Iraq (with 52 per cent). See *European Commission*, *Iraq and Peace in the World*. Full Report, November 2003 (Flash Eurobarometer, No. 151) [http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/iraq/doc/fl151_iraq_full_report.pdf], p. 78.

⁹ However, the results were also a consequence of the question's wording and the choices that respondents had: if people could have chosen 'Middle East conflict' instead of 'Israel' as a threat to world peace, the poll might have delivered more accurate results.

¹⁰ In a poll conducted by the German magazine *Der Spiegel* in June 2002, 70 per cent of the respondents said it was as legitimate for Germans to criticize Israeli policies

East conflict would eliminate one factor that strongly shapes negative perceptions of Israel in German society. Still, there are tendencies among the criticism of Israeli policies which have to do with generational changes, attitudes of migrant communities, and latent anti-Semitism that we have not sufficiently addressed so far. If we want to find out how to strengthen bilateral societal relations in the future, however, it is crucial to consider these developments very carefully.

Generational Changes

Firstly, changes in public opinion reflect generational changes in Germany. With the number of people who personally experienced the Third Reich decreasing, the approach to dealing with Israel is, for many, becoming less emotional and less burdened by history. Thus, the younger generation criticizes Israeli policies more openly than the older one, but at the same time rejects anti-Semitic arguments more clearly.¹¹ President Köhler's statement that the responsibility for the Shoa had become part of German identity, made during his Knesset speech of February 2005,¹² therefore seems to hold true also for the younger generation.

However, if we want the younger generation of both societies to develop strong mutual relations, exchange programmes and educational visits should also, but not as exclusively as they often do focus on the past, and they should place much more emphasis on common interests and future plans. Common interests in sports, culture, research and science should be strengthened in order to secure encounters oriented towards the future. That does not mean that sensitive political subjects, such as the Middle East conflict, should be kept out of German-Israeli encounters – to the contrary, German and Israeli youth

as it was to criticize any other country's policies, 29 per cent said it was not – because of German's historical responsibility. See Der Spiegel, Umfrage. Abschied vom Klischee?, in: Der Spiegel, 10.06.2002, p. 26f. For a discussion of this phenomenon see also several contributions in: *Deutsch-israelischer Arbeitskreis für Frieden im Nahen Osten (DI-AK)*, Israel & Palästina. Zeitschrift für Dialog, (2005) 2, (Themenheft: 40 Jahre deutsch-israelische diplomatische Beziehungen. Reflexionen und Erinnerungen).

¹¹ Anti-Semitic tendencies are more prevalent in the generation of those above 60 years. See Der Spiegel, Umfrage.

¹² See „Ansprache von Bundespräsident Horst Köhler vor der Knesset in Jerusalem“, 2.2.2005, [<http://www.bundespraesident.de/11057/Reden-und-Interviews.htm>].

should be encouraged to engage in discussions about their respective political views, their attitudes and values, and their visions for a better future as well as to understand one another's stands. We should also seriously consider the establishment of a German-Israeli youth exchange institution similar to the ones already created for German-French or German-Polish exchanges (Deutsch-Französisches Jugendwerk and Deutsch-Polnisches Jugendwerk respectively). Institutionalized structures will facilitate youth exchanges that allow for first hand experience of the other people's everyday life as well as for building personal relationships.

Migrant Communities

Secondly, it is sometimes argued that as large segments of migrant communities are Muslim, they strongly contribute to anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic tendencies. Although this seems to be the case for some segments with Muslim background in some European countries such as France and Denmark as well as for some of the more militant groups in Germany, it certainly does not apply to the vast majority of migrants in Germany.¹³ The Turkish community as Germany's largest immigrant community generally does not identify with the Palestinian or the Arab cause.¹⁴ However, it is undeniable that most immigrants do not feel compelled to accept a share of Germany's historical responsibility and are less interested in Germany's past. What they are interested in is their own future in Germany. One factor that should be paid more attention to in future exchange programmes, therefore, is the question of how to get migrant communities in Germany interested in exchanges with Israel. I think there is a great array of common interests and similar experiences to be looked at in Israel's mosaic society.

¹³ See *European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia*, Manifestations of Antisemitism in the EU 2002-2003, Wien 2004 [<http://eumc.eu.int/eumc/material/pub/AS/AS-Main-report.pdf>], p. 20-22; for a detailed look on the development of anti-Semitism in Germany *ibid.*, p. 57-75.

¹⁴ See, for example, „Schlag ins Wasser? Deutsche Muslime distanzieren sich von Jürgen Möller“, in: Der Spiegel, 10.6.2002, p. 24.

Anti-Semitism

Thirdly, as far as anti-Semitic tendencies are concerned, different groups and attitudes need to be distinguished from each other. On the extreme right of the political spectrum, there are segments exhibiting what can be called a “classic anti-Semitism” in the tradition of National Socialism. Groups linked to this tendency are responsible for most of the criminal anti-Semitic acts committed in Germany nowadays. Even more worrying, parties linked to this tendency have recently taken up their seats in a number of Germany’s state parliaments. Another phenomenon is what can be titled a “latent” or “secondary anti-Semitism” opposing ongoing remembrance of the Shoa and rejecting the German State’s responsibilities accruing from the Holocaust (which is also often belittled). This tendency seeks to distance itself from the past and is open for propaganda associating the Jews as such with crimes, thereby supposedly taking the blame off Germany or the Germans for the crimes against the Jews. According to a poll published in the German magazine *Stern* in November 2003, 23 per cent of the German population have a strong or latent anti-Semitic attitude.¹⁵ Finally, on the extreme left some groups criticize Israel as an imperialist, colonialist power, often ready to identify Jews as the personification of capitalism.

The current popularity enjoyed by the extreme Right in Germany can be explained as mainly being a response to German domestic problems such as high unemployment, but it also tells us that much remains to be done with regard to civic education. This embraces, above all, an education that enables young Germans to stand up to xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

Political and Diplomatic Relations

Last but not least, let me turn to political relations between Israel and Germany. Political relations are very intense and friendly and are reflected in a high number of visits between the two governments and by close contacts between the Knesset and the Bundestag – with the German-Israeli Parliamentary Group being the largest of the “friendship groups” in the German

¹⁵ See „Jeder fünfte Deutsche denkt antisemitisch. Umfrage zu Antisemitismus in Deutschland“, in: *Stern*, 20.11.2003, p. 52.

parliament. In the security field, these relations are supplemented by close military cooperation consisting of regular strategic dialogues, exchanges, joint training as well as common manoeuvres. This relationship is built on the premise that Germany’s historical moral responsibility for the Shoa translates into unconditional support for Israel’s right to exist as well as for its security. Indeed, support for Israel has been an important constant in German foreign policy. In Israel, Germany today is perceived not only as Israel’s most important political ally after the U.S., but also as a crucial supporter within the European decision-making process.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the sense of historical responsibility and German commitment to Israel’s well-being and security has always been but one interest with regards to the Middle East. Other major interests are, above all, stability in Europe’s neighbouring regions and fending off perceived threats emanating from the region (spill-over of conflicts, terrorism, migration, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, organized crime, etc.) as well as resource security. What does this mean and what should it mean for German policies towards Israel and the region? Because of Germany’s historic responsibility as well as the strong societal ties that have grown between the two countries, the German-Israeli relationship is and will remain a special one. Israel’s security will therefore remain a priority in German foreign policy. This support should, however, be based on the concept of “critical solidarity”:¹⁷ unconditional support for Israel’s existence and security, yet no uncritical adoption or acceptance of Israel’s security strategy or military doctrine. From a German point of view, Israel’s security is best guaranteed through a negotiated settlement with its Arab neighbours based on the land-for-peace formula and the establishment of a viable, peaceful and democratic Palestinian state alongside Israel. German policy – in the framework of European policy and in close coordination with the United States – should therefore support the parties to the

¹⁶ See Avi *Primor*, Ein Abgrund wurde überwunden, in: *Das Parlament*, (11. April 2005) 15, p. 1.

¹⁷ See Rolf *Rentdorff*, Die Anfänge, in: *DIAK, Israel & Palästina*, p. 10. For German policies towards the region see in detail Hermann *Gröhe* / Christoph *Moosbauer* / Volker *Perthes* / Christian *Sterzing*, Evenhanded, not neutral. Points of reference for a German Middle East policy, in: Volker *Perthes* (ed.), *Germany and the Middle East. Interests and Options*, Berlin 2002, p. 11-28.

Middle East conflict (as well as states in the wider region) in all steps that lead towards such a settlement and to Israel's integration in the region – after the conclusion of corresponding peace treaties.

Germany also has a clear interest of its own in Middle East peace. In addition to humanitarian concerns and Europe's general interest in regional stability, as mentioned before, Germany supports a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict because this would end the contradiction between special relations with Israel on the one hand and the interest in pursuing close relations with Arab states on the other. As one of the largest donors for the Palestinian Authority, Germany also has an interest that its aid indeed serves as a building block for a sustained economic and institutional development, and is not eaten up for more years for crisis management, humanitarian assistance and the mere survival of the PA. Germany therefore should make a renewed effort at ensuring that the EU play an active role in the region. More important than declarations, to this end, is to engage in constructive assistance in putting the peace process back on track. In the context of the current situation, this means doing everything possible in order to make the planned Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the Northern West Bank a success and thereby set a positive precedent and create a dynamic that will lead to further Israeli withdrawals and, ultimately, the end of occupation. This means, above all, to engage with the parties and the partners in the Quartet today in drawing up plans for the day after withdrawal.