



# AGIPOLICYREPORT

THE GERMAN-ISRAELI  
RELATIONSHIP: A CHRONICLE OF  
FOUR DECADES, 1983-2023

Dr. Lily Gardner Feldman



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German  
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## FOREWORD

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On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of our Institute, the Society, Culture, and Politics program is pleased to present Dr. Lily Gardner Feldman's policy brief devoted to understanding four decades of relations between Israel and Germany. Few countries have such a complicated and intertwined historical relationship and even fewer countries are as important to each other in the present. Grasping the historical evolution—the triumphs and tensions—of this special relationship are vital to understanding both countries, the larger regions in which they are embedded, and much of the international architecture of the contemporary world.

No one is as well-suited to write this report as Lily, who devoted her entire intellectual career to understanding Germany's efforts to redeem itself after the Holocaust and to reconcile with its neighbors and victims. Her work on the Israeli-German relationship has been central to this larger research agenda. Equally important is her foundational impact on the American-German Institute. Indeed, she was AGI's first Research Director, co-directed the Institute in 1995, and impeccably led the Society, Culture & Politics program for many years, so it is especially poignant that she has produced this report for our 40th anniversary year.

Readers should note that this report was completed before the October 2023 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's military response. Although mentioned in the report, this strife is on-going. The consequences of these events, especially for the Israeli-German relationship, cannot yet be foreseen and cannot be properly incorporated in the analysis. Nevertheless, the strong support and solidarity from the German government for Israel corresponds to the findings discussed in this report.



Dr. Eric Langenbacher  
Senior Fellow and Director, Society, Culture & Politics Program, AGI

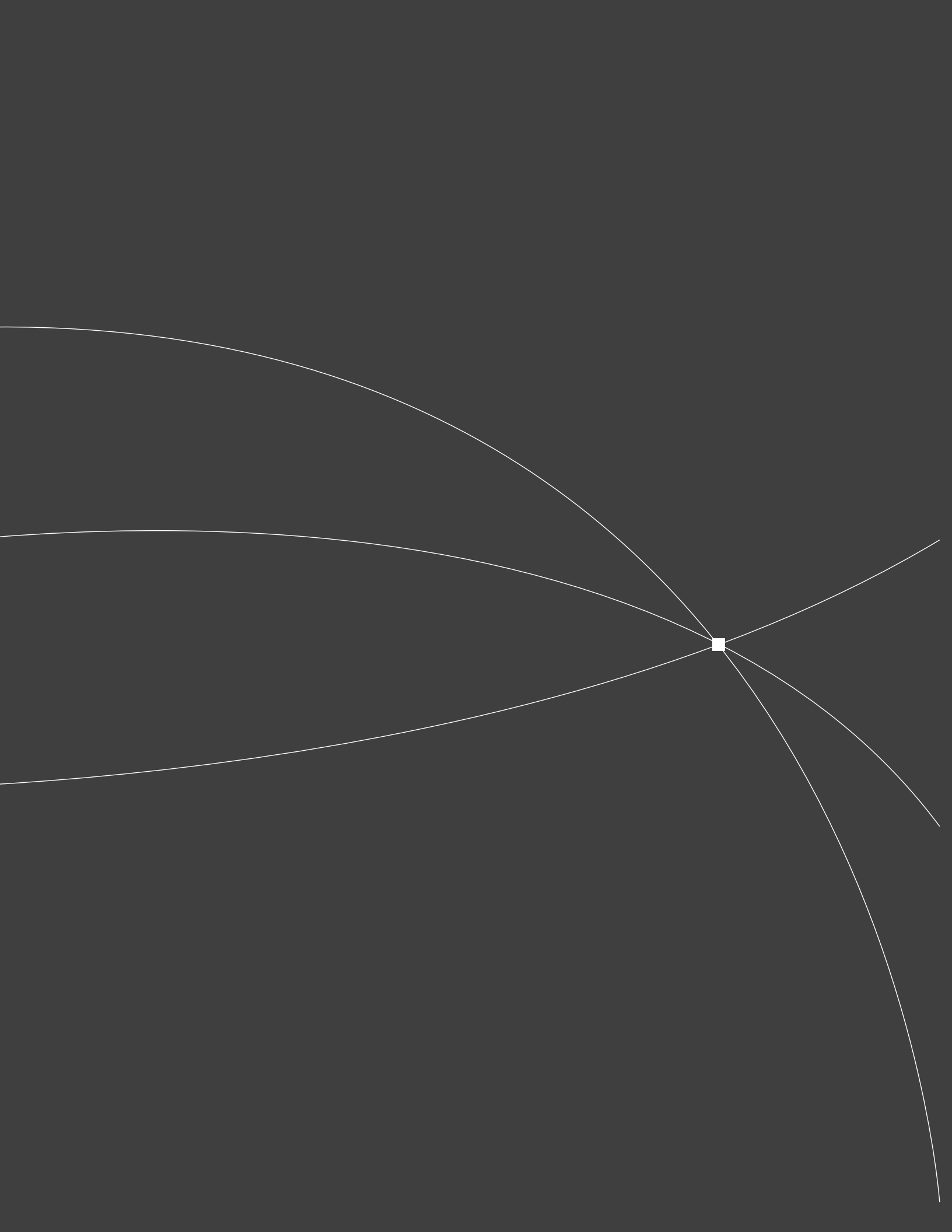
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Dr. Lily Gardner Feldman** is a Senior Fellow at the American-German Institute. She previously served as the Harry & Helen Gray Senior Fellow at AGI and directed the Institute's Society, Culture & Politics Program. She has a PhD in Political Science from MIT.

From 1978 until 1991, Dr. Gardner Feldman was a professor of political science (tenured) at Tufts University in Boston. She was also a Research Associate at Harvard University's Center for European Studies, where she chaired the German Study Group and edited *German Politics and Society*; and a Research Fellow at Harvard University's Center for International Affairs, where she chaired the Seminar on the European Community and undertook research in the University Consortium for Research on North America. From 1990 until 1995, Dr. Gardner Feldman was the first Research Director of AGI and its Co-director in 1995. From 1995 until 1999, she was a Senior Scholar in Residence at the BMW Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University. She returned to Johns Hopkins University in 1999.

Dr. Gardner Feldman has published widely in the United States and Europe on German foreign policy, German-Jewish relations, international reconciliation, non-state entities as foreign policy players, and the EU as an international actor. Her latest publications are: *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity*, 2014; "Die Bedeutung zivilgesellschaftlicher und staatlicher Institutionen: Zur Vielfalt und Komplexität von Versöhnung," in Corine Defrance and Ulrich Pfeil, eds., *Verständigung und Versöhnung*, 2016; and "The Limits and Opportunities of Reconciliation with West Germany During the Cold War: A Comparative Analysis of France, Israel, Poland and Czechoslovakia" in Hideki Kan, ed., *The Transformation of the Cold War and the History Problem*, 2017 (in Japanese). Her work on Germany's foreign policy of reconciliation has led to lecture tours in Japan and South Korea.



## INTRODUCTION

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Since the early 1950s, a “special relationship” between Germany and Israel has been a constant feature of the improbable partnership embarked upon by Germans and Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The term “special relationship” (*Sonderbeziehung, Sonderverhältnis*) has a dual sense, combining the darkness of the Holocaust with the light that had carried the two countries over the abyss. The term captures both the uniqueness of history and the preferential relations that Germany and Israel each had with few other countries.<sup>1</sup>

Ever since the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS—now the American-German Institute) was founded in 1983, the German-Israeli special relationship has figured prominently in its work through seminars, conferences, research, and fellowships.

This essay addresses key events and developments in the German-Israeli special relationship during the forty years since the American-German Institute was founded. Though some non-governmental activity will be discussed, attention is largely paid to government behavior.<sup>2</sup>

The dualities that defined preferential ties between Germany and Israel from 1950 to 1983 endure to the present day and thus are relevant to this essay’s examination of the period between 1983 and 2023:

- Structure: Concrete institutions & the more general overarching framework of a culture of remembrance (*Erinnerungskultur*)
- Motives: Pragmatism & morality
- Actors: Governments & civil society
- Content: Cooperation & conflict
- Contours: Dealing with the past of World War II and the Holocaust (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) & the future
- Opinion: Positive & negative attitudes of society
- Context: Bilateral & multilateral (European Union) frameworks

The years between 1983 and 2023 can be broken down into four discrete periods and stages:

- 1983-1992: Growth and Crises
- 1993-2002: Consolidation and the Pragmatism-Morality Spectrum
- 2003-2012 Reassessment and New Institutions
- 2013-2023: Maturity and Fundamental Challenge

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an early in-depth theoretical and empirical study, see Lily Gardner Feldman, *The Special Relationship between West Germany and Israel* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984). For more recent works on the German-Israeli special relationship in theory and practice, see Kai Oppermann and Mischa Hansel, "The Ontological Security of Special Relationships: The Case of Germany's Relationship with Israel" in *European Journal of International Security*, vol. 4, issue 1, February 2019; Felix Berenskötter and Mor Mitrani, "Is It Friendship? An Analysis of Contemporary German-Israeli Relations," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 66, 2022; and Kathrin Bachleitner, "The Path to Atonement: West Germany and Israel after the Holocaust," *International Security*, vol. 47, no. 4, Spring 2023.

<sup>2</sup> For more on civil society organizations, see: Lily Gardner Feldman, "The Role of Non-State Actors in Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation," in Anne-Marie Le Gloanec, ed., *Non-State Actors in International Relations: The Case of Germany* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

## 1983-1992: GROWTH AND CRISES

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### Tension and Release

This decade in German-Israeli relations commenced with controversy during Chancellor Helmut Kohl's January 1984 visit to Israel. He characterized the visit as the first by a chancellor of the "postwar generation," and in his Knesset speech, he referred to this generation's "grace of late birth," a phrase interpreted by many, including Israel's ambassador to Germany, to mean a weakening of the historical basis for the relationship.

The tension continued when Kohl initiated and vigorously pursued a joint May 5, 1985, visit with President Ronald Reagan to the Bitburg military cemetery, where numerous SS officers were buried. Israeli citizens demonstrated in Tel Aviv. In an effort to soften the blow two days after the visit, Germany's ambassador to Israel, Niels Hansen, participated in a Yad Vashem commemoration of the defeat of Nazism. On other occasions, like his April 21, 1985, speech at the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, Kohl remembered history: "Reconciliation with the survivors and descendants of the victims is only possible if we accept our history as it really was, if we Germans acknowledge...our historical responsibility..."<sup>1</sup> Two weeks after the Bergen-Belsen speech, in the Bundestag, President Richard von Weizsäcker expanded at length on German responsibility for the past, including these words: "If we for our part sought to forget what has occurred, instead of remembering, this would not only be inhuman. We would also impinge on upon the faith of the Jews who survived and destroy the basis of reconciliation."<sup>2</sup> His speech was well-received in Israel and contributed to an ease in tensions. In October 1985, von Weizsäcker was the first German president to visit

Israel. In 1987, Chaim Herzog became the first Israeli president to visit Germany.

### Governmental Institutions

German-Israeli governmental institutions were also an essential part of the relationship in this decade, for example, the 1986 creation of the German-Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development, which has become a mainstay of bilateral ties. It is funded by various German ministries and the German Research Foundation. The decade in general witnessed the expansion of institutional ties to new areas, such as the Agricultural Agreement in 1986. Notably, in this decade military and intelligence relations flourished, following on from the special and secret 1982 Israel Clause of the Chancellor Helmut Schmidt era, which, according to Hubert Leber, exempted Israel from strictures (no arms exports to areas of tension) of the Political Principles for Arms Exports due to Germany's historical responsibility for the past.<sup>3</sup>

### German Reunification

German reunification in 1989-90 had major implications for German-Israeli relations. The Israeli government and society faced the reality of a larger Germany and recalled World War II and the Holocaust when Germany was previously united. Israeli society met the prospect of a stronger Germany with skepticism, which aligned with the initial reaction of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who feared a powerful, new Germany would be the "Fourth Reich." However, the Israeli foreign minister, Moshe Arens, expressed a more pragmatic attitude, believing that Germany would



continue to be a democracy and remain firmly ensconced in the EU. Germany's measured and multilateral handling of reunification confirmed Arens' view, and the relationship with Israel could quickly be restored. A decade after unification, Foreign Minister Fischer noted: "Without reconciliation with Poland and Israel, German unification would have been impossible."

### The First Iraq War

Crisis returned in the German-Israeli partnership toward the end of this ten-year period with the first Iraq war in 1991. Scud missiles rained down on Israel, and Israelis were forced to assemble gas masks against a possible Iraqi chemical weapons attack, another reminder of the past, this time in the form of gas as a killing agent. Both the scud missiles and chemical weapons of the First Gulf War were apparently built with the help of German companies. As an act of moral solidarity with beleaguered Israel, Kohl dispatched his foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, to Israel. Kohl announced that Germany would provide humanitarian aid to the country, and Genscher promised tighter restrictions on the export of dual-use equipment.

### Middle East Policy in the Context of the European Community

While the bilateral relationship between Israel and Germany was intensifying between 1983 and 1992, Germany was also pursuing Middle East policy in the context of the EU. By 1983, Germany had evolved a policy of neutrality or balance in the Middle East conflict (*Ausgewogenheit*), steadfastly supporting both Israel's right to exist and Palestinian self-determination. In the economic and technical spheres, however, Germany did consistently advocate for Israel's interests. Modifications made in 1986 to the 1975 Preferential Trade Agreement between Israel and the European Community are one such example of Germany having supported Israeli interests during the 1980s.

### Civil Society

To examine the relationship between Israeli and German civil societies in the 1980s, we can look to cultural exchange programs and institutions, as well as public opinion. For example, the Goethe Institute in Jerusalem, with funding from the German government, now thrived (it had been transformed into a fully-fledged institution in 1981), demonstrating that there were positive developments at the societal level. By this time, bilateral cultural ties and exchanges were quite plentiful, but it was only in 1988 that negotiations on a cultural protocol began, revealing how sensitive Israelis were about German culture (witness the long-standing debate about performing Wagner in Israel<sup>4</sup>). Intensification and expansion of societal links occurred also across political parties, economics, trade unions, science, youth exchange, and town twinnings. Though multiple civil society actors connected the two societies in positive and sustained ways, public opinion polls reveal more differentiated views among individuals. According to surveys by the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, in 1983, only 19 percent of Germans expressed sympathy for the Israelis in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in 1986, 66 percent of Germans wanted to "draw a line under the past," (*einen Schlussstrich ziehen*) with only 24 percent believing the past should still be addressed; 58 percent of Germans believed Israel should be treated like any other country and that Germany should not be influenced by the past. Though the percentage of Germans expressing sympathy for Israelis in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict grew from 19 percent in 1983 to 39 percent in 1987, it still represented a minority view.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, Remembrance, *Sorrow and Reconciliation: Speeches and Declarations in Connection with the 40th Anniversary of the End of the Second World War in Europe* (Bonn: Press and Information Office of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany, 1985), 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>3</sup> Hubert Leber and Dona Geyer, "Arms Exports and Holocaust Memory: Saudi Arabia, Leopard Tanks, and Bonn's Secret Israel Clause of 1982," *German Yearbook of Contemporary History*, vol. 6, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the debate about playing Wagner in Israel, see: Alex Ross, "The Case for Wagner in Israel," *The New Yorker*, September 25, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Edgar Piel, eds., *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie, 1978-1983, Band 8* (Munich: K.G.Saur, 1983); Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Renate Köcher, eds., *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie, 1984-92, Band 9* (Munich: K.G.Saur, 1993).

## 1993-2002: CONSOLIDATION AND THE PRAGMATISM-MORALITY SPECTRUM

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### More Firsts

There continued to be symbolic “firsts” in the relationship between Germany and Israel during the period between 1993 and 2002, with Ezer Weizman becoming the first Israeli President to address the Bundestag in January 1996 and Johannes Rau becoming the first German president to speak before the Knesset in February 2000. Through these high-level visits, German and Israeli officials sang the praises of the partnership and Germany re-committed to Israel’s security.

### Schröder

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was a pragmatist in foreign policy, including on the issue of Jews and Israel, but he also possessed a moral orientation. After a synagogue in Düsseldorf was firebombed in 2000, for example, he called for an “uprising of the decent” to fight anti-Semitism and xenophobia. He acknowledged the importance of history and remembrance and, like von Weizsäcker in his 1985 speech, spoke of responsibility for the past and the Germans’ need to confront it. Also like von Weizsäcker, Schröder rejected the notion of collective guilt but did not eschew guilt on an individual level.

### Victim Compensation

The Schröder government continued to combine pragmatism with moral concern in how it handled compensating survivors of slavery and forced labor. Even though Jewish claimants in the diaspora and Israel constituted a minority of survivors, the subject was a priority for the German government. Class action suits in the United States prompted negotiations in Washington, DC, between 1998 and 2000

to, as Schröder put it at the time, “counter lawsuits and class action suits, and to remove the basis of the campaign being led against German industry and our country.” Schröder subsequently confirmed twin motives, explaining after the negotiations that “One part of our payments means moral duty, but the other part is ‘legal peace.’”<sup>1</sup>

### South Lebanon Conflict

Schröder’s actions and statements regarding the Middle East and Israel demonstrated Germany’s special commitment to the Jewish state, for example in his 2000 trip to Israel when renewed bloodshed in the area did not deter him from making the planned visit. During Schröder’s visit, the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak proclaimed Germany one of Israel’s closest friends and sought Schröder’s intervention to secure the release in Lebanon of Israeli prisoners. This practice would extend successfully to other locations and well into the future with both Hezbollah and Hamas.

### Second Intifada

In 2002, during the second Palestinian intifada against Israel (occasioned by the visit of Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount) a major Bundestag debate confirmed Germany’s support for Israel’s right to exist—but also the German right to criticize Israel for its actions toward Palestinians. Schröder emphasized that Palestinians should be “equal neighbors and negotiating partners.” He cloaked this approach in the EU mantle but did not forget the Jewish state when the German government rejected the calls of most of the EU’s members for economic sanctions against Israel. At the same time in April 2002, Germany supported Israel at the UN Human Rights

Commission by voting against a resolution condemning Israel.

### Fischer

If Chancellor Schröder rested in the middle of the pragmatism-morality spectrum with respect to Jews and Israel, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer sat squarely on the morality end. Fischer's ideas on the relationship between history and foreign policy were fourfold: 1. Germans were obligated to learn lessons from the past; 2. both principles and interests should drive German policy, but the latter should be circumscribed and embedded in history; 3. German foreign policy should not seek "normalcy," and 4. accepting history meant feeling shame for Nazism's crimes.

Fischer grappled with history in his many trips to Israel; for example, by 2005 he had made fourteen visits. He was very open about his views: "Israel's right to exist in peace and secure borders is an inviolable basis of German foreign policy,"<sup>2</sup> he said in May 2002.

Support for Israel, etched as a "moral responsibility," did not preclude a concern for German and European security interests or support for Palestinian rights (including a state). As a mediator between Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Chairman Yasser Arafat following the 2001 Tel Aviv discotheque bombing, Fischer persuaded Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to respond in a measured way to the attack. Fischer's success was evidence of his excellent bona fides with both the Israeli and Palestinian sides.

Fischer still championed Israel in challenging times, however. On several occasions he vigorously opposed what he saw as one-sided criticism of Israel in German demonstrations regarding the Jewish state's handling of the Palestinian second intifada. His past experience on the political left led him to warn that extreme criticism of Israel could have ill consequences when "anti-Zionism turns into anti-Semitism." From his many visits to Israel, Fischer understood that existentially Israel needed to be strong, so he pushed for the continuation of the "traditional" arms cooperation (dating back to

the mid-1950s), which contravened Germany's arms export guidelines ("no weapons to areas of tension"). The chancellor was more restrained concerning arms exports to Israel, although over the course of the 1990s there was the mutual supply of weapons, including three submarines to Israel (paid for by the United States).

### Governmental Institutions

In terms of government institutions and practices, military exchanges between Germany and Israel proliferated in this period, including meetings of the chiefs of staff, regular encounters between leadership in the individual branches of the armed forces, and joint training. The intelligence relationship also blossomed, seen in the active exchange of technical and strategic information between the intelligence services, especially on weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. Other bilateral institutions were renewed and refined to take into account a new, post-Cold War era. The moribund Mixed Economic Commission found new life. In March 1993, a joint declaration on further cooperation in economics and technology emerged. A few months later, Germany issued an anti-boycott decree to prevent private German companies from complying with Arab countries' economic demands to discriminate against Israel. Culturally, the intergovernmental negotiations initiated in 1988 climaxed in the 2000 protocol on cultural cooperation.

### Middle East Policy in the Context of the EU

Chancellor Kohl had continued his advocacy and action in the EU on Israel's behalf before the change in government in 1998, for example, in Israel's being accorded "special status" within the EU at the 1994 Essen Summit. Germany also championed the 1995 EU-Israel Association Agreement during Kohl's chancellorship. Schröder followed this precedent, for example, Israel's admission to the Fifth European Framework Programme for Research and Development followed at the time of the 1999 Berlin Declaration, which also committed the EU to aid the creation of a Palestinian state.

Fischer's April 2002 seven-point Middle East peace plan was advanced at the EU and called for the "unconditional prosecution of and punishment for terrorist activities," but he firmly criticized Israel in December 2003 when it built a wall to separate militarily the Palestinians in the West Bank from Israel. At a time when the EU was increasingly hostile to Israel, Fischer accepted Israel's "right to defend itself against the terrorist threat" and indicated he could accept a fence following the "course of the Green Line" (Israel's border with the West Bank before the 1967 war) but could not support the actual fence built well into Palestinian land and outside the Green Line.

### Civil Society

Fischer's personal and professional engagement with Israel led him to praise the work of German civil society organizations there, including Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienst). The organization was founded in 1958 to address the Protestant church's failure to act during the Holocaust and World War II. In Israel, young German volunteers spend a year working with the mentally, physically, and economically challenged, as well as Holocaust survivors and Jewish-Palestinian groups. Since 1961, Action Reconciliation has provided some 2,500 volunteers for Israel. In 1998, Action Reconciliation expanded its activities by placing young Israeli volunteers in Germany and by conducting bilateral youth meetings.

As in the previous period, German public attitudes did not match the enthusiasm of civil society organizations, which showed solidarity with Israel through cooperative acts spanning the breadth of German and Israeli societies. In Allensbach polls of November 2000, a slight plurality of respondents supported the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, and a clear majority supported payments for Third Reich slave and forced labor victims. However, 66 percent of Germans surveyed indicated that they did not feel burdened by the past, and Israel was still seen negatively by the German public: it tied with the

Czech Republic in 15th place out of 19 in a July 2001 cooperation poll and was second to last in the sympathy poll. On the Middle East conflict, by March 2001 support for Israel had sunk by 25 points compared to a decade earlier. Support for a Palestinian state stood at 51 percent; a paltry 11 percent of respondents deemed Palestinian statehood a threat to Israel.<sup>3</sup>

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Chancellor Schröder's strategy in the negotiations, see: Lily Gardner Feldman, "A Three-Dimensional View of German History: The Weight of the Past in Germany's Relations with Jews in Germany, Israel and the Diaspora," in James Sperling, ed., *Germany at Fifty-Five: Berlin ist nicht Bonn* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, "Rede von Bundesausenminister Fischer zur Eröffnung der dritten Konferenz der Leiterinnen und Leiter der deutschen Auslandsvertretungen am 27. Mai, 2002," Berlin.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Renate Köcher, eds., *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie, 1998-2002* (Munich: K.G.Saur, 2002).

## 2003-2012: REASSESSMENT AND NEW INSTITUTIONS

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### 40th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations

The 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2005 was an opportunity to bring together various parts of the German-Israeli partnership, take stock of the past, and prepare institutionally for the future. Numerous activities expressed the closeness and friendship between the two nations: cultural and political events throughout the year, a garden party for six hundred young Germans and Israelis in Berlin, a special performance by the Israel Philharmonic, an exchange of visits by the two presidents and addresses to their respective parliaments, and a joint article by the two foreign ministers on the relationship in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*. In the many statements accompanying the anniversary, politicians, public figures, and NGOs referred to the “special relationship” between the two nations.

Specialness and uniqueness found firm expression in Chancellor Angela Merkel’s March 2008 visit to Israel to celebrate its sixtieth birthday. Giving the first speech to the Israeli Knesset by a German chancellor, Merkel hailed a pattern of preferential policies and remembrance. She deemed the Holocaust a “rupture of civilization” (*Zivilisationsbruch*), for which Germany was wholly and eternally responsible: “Germany’s historical responsibility for Israel’s security is part of my country’s reason of state (*Staatsräson, raison d’état*<sup>1</sup>).” She emphasized the common values and common interests joining the two countries and wondered how to translate the unique relationship between Germany and Israel from rhetoric into reality, suggesting that “Memories must constantly be recalled. Thoughts must become words, and words deeds.” Merkel also firmly advocated for a

two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, thereby accepting a Palestinian state. For some Israeli leaders, this was a particularly sore point in fact, if not in rhetoric. The German chancellor’s response to Israeli criticism around Iran disappointed leaders as well. Israel proposed that, to transform words into deeds as Merkel insisted she would, Germany should help prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power by completely severing trade relations. Instead, Merkel recommended that German business limit its economic dealings with Iran.

### Governmental Institutions: Strong Military and Cabinet Links

Notwithstanding issues for some Israeli leaders with Germany’s approach to Palestine and Iran, under Merkel’s leadership military and intelligence relations between Israel and Germany intensified with multiple visits, training, and exchanges. And a new dimension to military ties was introduced by the Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah: following the 2006 ceasefire Germany agreed, after heated debate, to join the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon to interdict arms shipments for Hezbollah, one of the hardest decisions in the Federal Republic’s history. The “trust” between Germany and Israel that Merkel emphasized in her 2008 Knesset speech was on display as Germany continued as a successful mediator with Hamas and Hezbollah between 2006 and 2009 for the exchange of prisoners, return of soldiers’ remains, and the release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Yet again, the military relationship was reciprocal, for example, the 2006 bilateral agreement for the Israeli purchase of two submarines with Germany

absorbing one-third of the cost, the 2009 German purchase of Israeli drones for use in Afghanistan, and the related Israeli training of German soldiers in Israel, a first in the relationship.

Another first regarding institutions and cooperation was the inauguration in 2008 of German-Israeli cabinet consultations on the occasion of Merkel's trip to Israel. The two cabinets and heads of government would meet regularly, ideally every year. In her Knesset speech, she noted the consultations' agreements and projects on foreign and defense policy, economics, justice, environmental protection, science and technology, and youth exchange. The two countries established a joint German-Israeli Future Forum to connect young Germans and Israelis in the fields of business, academia, and culture.

## Merkel I

In her long tenure as chancellor, Merkel and her two-time foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier travelled repeatedly to Israel and the broader Middle East, always with two messages: Israel's right to exist and its security were paramount, emanating from Germany's history of the Holocaust; and Palestinian self-determination was essential. They also saw Palestinian terrorism and Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories as twin scourges alien to the peace process.

Like other chancellors, Merkel was acutely aware of the danger of anti-Semitism in Germany and felt that knowing Germany's history was primary for countering it: "Those who do not understand the past, have no future"<sup>2</sup> she wrote at Yad Vashem (quoting Alexander von Humboldt) during her first trip to Israel in January 2006 (one of her first foreign trips as chancellor, manifesting her deep commitment to the country). Increasingly, Germany and Israel worked together to combat anti-Semitism, as was clear at the 2012 joint cabinet consultations: "[there was] total engagement for human rights and for the fight against anti-Semitism."<sup>3</sup> German leaders linked this approach to expressing solidarity with Israel.

Yet, there continued to be German criticism of Israel's actions vi-à-vis the Palestinians. The idea of the German government's criticism of Israel was not new, originating in the early 1970s. Now German and Israeli leaders were able to exchange openly on the topic. In a December 2012 press conference with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Merkel added a further dimension to special relations, the ability to address, manage, and overcome conflicting policy views: "Relations are untouchable and can withstand differing opinion. [These differences] must be discussed among friends." Netanyahu responded: "I would be insincere if I didn't say I was disappointed ... by the German vote in the UN [abstention on the Palestinian Authority's request for observer status]," but he recognized that this did not undermine the essence of the relationship: "People know that there is a special relationship between Germany and Israel."<sup>4</sup> Israel had been looking for a "no" vote.

## Middle East Policy in the Context of the EU

Germany's opposition to Israel's settlement policy aligned with the EU's priorities on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which concerned Israel on many occasions. But Germany still played the role of Israel's advocate, particularly on economic issues, for example, in the December 2004 EU-Israel Action Plan, which increased Israel's participation in EU programs on industry, science and technology, agriculture and the environment, as well as non-economic policy areas. It included a commitment to a Palestinian state. However, the EU's criticism of Israel in the 2008-2009 Gaza War meant that an update of the Action Plan was shelved.

When Germany held the EU Council presidency in 2007, Merkel resurfaced the role of the Quartet (United States, EU, UN, Russia) in the Middle East peace process and sought to expand Israel's ties with the EU. In October 2007, she initiated the EU's Action Strategy for the Middle East, and in December 2009, Germany rejected the EU plan to acknowledge East Jerusalem as the capital of any future Palestinian state. The EU then conditioned Israel's inclusion in EU programs on exclusion of

the occupied territories from the arrangements.

### Civil Society

The 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations that set the tone for much of the decade had emphasized the role of youth in the special relationship, a point that Merkel and Steinmeier would reiterate whenever possible. At the end of the 1950s, youth exchange had emerged haltingly as a private activity of civil society. Only in the early 1970s did the two governments become engaged financially and organizationally. President Rau's 2000 initiative for a coordinating body, ConAct (under the aegis of the Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women, and Youth) signified further institutionalization. The 2018 creation of the German-Israeli Youth Exchange took activities and organization and funding to new levels. From the 1950s until 2006, at least 500,000 Germans and Israelis had participated in youth exchange programs. Some 2,000 Israelis and 4,500 Germans participate every year. The purpose of exchange is to understand the other society and its differences. There is a clear orientation to the present and the future in the discussions among youth, but German history still occupies an important place.

Organizations like those for youth exchange have achieved longevity and thus provide a panoramic view of relations between the two societies. Public opinion surveys, however, proffer a narrower snapshot. According to Allensbach polls, negative attitudes toward Israel from past periods continued in Merkel's first government through September 2009.<sup>5</sup> Public opinion was divided on the question of "drawing a line" under the past: 44 percent answered in the affirmative and 43 percent in the negative. Other questions revealed a much more lopsided view: 69 percent thought Germany had dealt sufficiently with the past, and only 15 percent disagreed. On Israel specifically, negative attitudes remained: a majority deemed relations with Israel "good" but only 6 percent considered them "very good." Only a minority of Germans, 35 percent, believed that Germany "has a special responsibility for the fate of Israel," whereas half of respondents disagreed.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Die Bundesregierung, "Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Dr. Angela Merkel vor der Knesset am 18. März 2008 in Jerusalem," *Bulletin* 26-1, March 18, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Yad Vashem, "Visit of German chancellor Angela Merkel to Yad Vashem," 30 January 2006, at: <https://www.yadvashem.org/events/30-january-2006>

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Lily Gardner Feldman, "What's in a Name? The German-Israeli Partnership: Is it a Special Relationship, a Friendship, an Alliance, or Reconciliation?" *American Institute for Contemporary German Studies Advisor*, March 6, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Renate Köcher, ed., *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie 2003-2009*. Die Berliner Republik (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).



## 2013-2023: MATURITY AND FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGE

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### 50th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations

Just as ten years earlier with the 40th anniversary, the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2015 spawned many opportunities for reflection, reassessment, and praise for the many activities connecting Israel and Germany's governments and societies, as Merkel noted: "We are not neutral," concerning Israel.<sup>1</sup> "Our two countries are connected by extraordinarily close and broad-based political, economic, cultural and social links, to the benefit of their people."<sup>2</sup> Virtually all organs of government and a panoply of societal actors celebrated the occasion with mutual presidential visits, joint statements, conferences, sporting and cultural events, new joint educational programs, and new joint scientific projects, which all testified to the maturity of the relationship. Merkel and her foreign minister Steinmeier deemed the very fact of such a relationship a "miracle." The sixth cabinet consultations the next year furthered the institutionalization of relations in multiple spheres and turned a number of the anniversary's promises into reality.

### Governmental Institutions

Once again, the robustness of the military relationship was on display. During her May 2015 visit to Israel, German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen had concluded a deal for the sale, at a sizeable discount, of corvette warships and remarked enthusiastically on the seventy joint security projects in which Germany and Israel were engaged. Two years later, in October 2017, Germany and Israel were signing a memorandum of understanding for the sale of three more German submarines for Israel with the full, but unstated,

understanding that they could be equipped with missiles for offensive purposes and were still in contravention of the restrictions on exporting arms to "areas of tension."

Other institutional structures emerged from cabinet consultations. On a number of occasions, Merkel had stressed the common values and common interests of the two states. This combination was expressed in 2014 when Germany and Israel launched the Africa Initiative, which was designed to deal with poverty, hunger, food insecurity, climate change, and sustainable development in several African countries. The jointness of the initiative in the international realm and beyond the bilateral relationship was a novel development, aimed at pursuing Judaism's principle of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). It was also in the political and security interests of Germany and Israel to try to foster stability in the region.

### Merkel II-IV

While repeating Germany's historically-based obligation to Israel's security, German leaders were more explicit now in what they meant by that commitment, beyond the provision of weapons. They linked the Jewish state's security to two aspects of increasing disagreement with Israel: solidarity with Israel dictated a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for only then could there be long-term peace; Israel's regional security would be enhanced by the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran aimed at checking its nuclear ambitions and capacity. While acknowledging that Germany was talking to Iran, Merkel added in February 2016 that Iran would have to recognize Israel before there could be a

normalization of relations with Germany. When answering earlier to an interview question about Iran and nuclear weapons she said: “[*Raison d’état*] means we will never be neutral and that Israel can be sure of our support when it comes to ensuring its security.”<sup>3</sup> But she could still be “furious” with Israel over new settlement on the West Bank.

Netanyahu’s settlement plans and practice and treatment of Palestinians became a serious bone of contention which led to vehement exchanges between Germany and Israel. Although Merkel had a personal commitment to Israel and Israelis, she did not enjoy a warm relationship with Netanyahu. She and others repeated earlier statements that differences of opinion could be openly talked about between friends. Merkel also recognized that “good relations require constant care; you have to talk with one another all the time.”<sup>4</sup> The fact and frequency of the exchanges were a sign of directness and honesty befitting a mature relationship.

Tensions were heightened—and not helped—by Merkel’s new and short-lived foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel, who stated that Israel was an apartheid state due to its treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories. On Gabriel’s first visit to Israel as foreign minister in 2017, Netanyahu snubbed him by refusing to meet after the foreign minister had met Israeli NGOs critical of their government. The differences over settlements and treatment of Palestinians led Germany to cancel the 2017 joint cabinet consultations, although the Germans’ publicly-cited reason was scheduling problems. The consultations resumed in October 2018, for the seventh time.

Beyond the refrain of an iron-clad commitment to Israeli security, Merkel and other leaders continued to deplore the reality of anti-Semitism in Germany. In September 2014, Merkel labeled anti-Semitism a “monstrous scandal” when people were attacked for being Jewish or supporting Israel.<sup>5</sup> Guido Westerwelle, foreign minister in Merkel’s second administration, had already made this crystal clear in a May 2013 speech to the World Jewish Congress. The Bundestag resolution on anti-Semitism in June 2014 was even stronger: “Solidarity with Israel is an integral part of German

*raison d’état*.... [when] Israeli flags are burnt, anti-Semitic language is expressed [and there is] solidarity with terrorist and anti-Semitic groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, [this] goes beyond the boundaries of legitimate criticism of Israeli policy.”<sup>6</sup>

Israel shared the German concern about anti-Semitism, which grew when the right-wing and anti-Semitic Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered the Bundestag in 2017 with 94 seats, a sign that xenophobia could now be regularly expressed in a hallowed institution. In 2017, anti-Semitic incidents rose 10 percent over the previous year; violent attacks were up by two-thirds, and the number of individual victims rose by 55 percent. This upswing led the next year to Merkel’s appointment of a commissioner to coordinate the government’s response to anti-Semitism. She also warned of a new type of hatred: anti-Jewish and anti-Israel prejudice on the part of some refugees from the Middle East, whose numbers had grown exponentially with the extensive admission of migrants in 2015. In her first visit as chancellor to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in December 2019, she bemoaned “unfathomable” anti-Semitism in Germany’s past and present, and said remembrance and acknowledgement of the crimes constituted part of Germany’s national identity. In May 2021, after demonstrations in Germany against the Israeli bombardment of Gaza following Hamas rocket attacks into Israel, she initiated a ban on the flag of Hamas. German President Steinmeier reinforced Merkel’s view that hatred of Jews was unacceptable in Germany: “Whoever burns Star of David flags or shouts anti-Semitic slogans... is not only abusing the right to demonstrate but committing a crime.”<sup>7</sup>

In May 2021, while demonstrations were happening in Germany and continued bloodshed between Israel and Hamas blighted the chances of a negotiated peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Germany’s foreign minister Heiko Maas, who had entered politics because of Auschwitz, made a lightning visit to Israel in a show of solidarity. He reiterated the German position that Israel had a right to defend itself “against this massive and unacceptable [Hamas] attack.”<sup>8</sup> He had made the same point in a previous visit to Israel in June 2020,

but on that occasion, he criticized the Netanyahu government's plan to formally annex parts of the West Bank. He characterized the settlements as illegal under international law and detrimental to a negotiated peace.

By October 2021, Merkel was nearing the end of her sixteen-year tenure as chancellor. Of all the events marking her longevity in office and her achievements, one stood out: a "farewell" trip to Israel, which was her eighth visit to the Jewish state. Merkel's first visit in January 2006 and her last in October 2021 constituted "bookends" to a relationship that mixed friendship and cooperation with criticism and cajoling. She was praised as a "moral compass" for Europe by Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett during the weekly cabinet meeting, whose attendance by the chancellor was a gesture of Israel's deep respect for her. In the cabinet meeting, Israel's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid noted the significance of her visit and the ties with Germany: "If after the most horrible event in the history of mankind we can sit here together— allies, friends, real partners—then there is hope for humankind ... [and] the possibility that good can conquer evil."<sup>9</sup> Merkel observed what constituted friendship: "We sometimes disagree on questions such as whether there should be a two-state solution with the Palestinians, but we agree, I think, that there must always be a vision of a lasting democratic Jewish State of Israel."<sup>10</sup>

## Scholz

With the December 2021 advent of the Chancellor Olaf Scholz administration in Germany, the friendship would be sorely challenged by Israel's increased settlement activity and the enduring conflict between Israel and Hamas, as well as, ultimately, by the struggle over the very concept of democracy in Israel. There was the real danger that all these upheavals could become a litmus test of reconciliation. When Scholz made his first trip to Israel (one of his first trips abroad) in March 2022, he wrote in the Yad Vashem guest book that Germany had a "permanent responsibility for the security of the State of Israel and the protection of Jewish life."<sup>11</sup> However, in his trip he insisted, as had his foreign minister a month before, that a

diplomatic deal on the Iran nuclear issue could not be postponed; this was a German approach that Israel firmly rejected.

## Tensions in Israel and the Middle East

By the end of 2022, there was another Netanyahu government in power, this time the most right-wing coalition in Israel's history. When National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir visited in January 2023 the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, a place sacred to both Jews and Muslims, the German foreign ministry spokesman deemed it a "provocation." More harsh German words were to come throughout the spring: the chancellor, foreign minister, president, German ambassador to Israel, and justice minister all expressed grave concern over Netanyahu's plan for a massive overhaul of the judiciary, thereby limiting the high court's veto right regarding policy decisions of the government. Scholz did not mince words: "As close friends of Israel with shared democratic values, we are following this debate very closely, and I cannot hide the fact that we're following it with great concern."<sup>12</sup> German officials clearly supported Israeli President Herzog's "compromise" plan. The German minister of justice reverted to the past to warn the Israeli government: "Learning from history means recognizing that democracies can abolish themselves of their own accord ... Our German Basic Law, therefore, contains a system of checks and balances including a strong, independent judiciary."<sup>13</sup> The ghost of Weimar was ever-present. A placard in the demonstrations against Netanyahu's March 2023 visit to Berlin named the danger most succinctly: "Democracy. Remember What Happened Here When It Was Lost."

By May 2023, the grave concerns deepened when renewed fighting broke out between Israel and Hamas. A foreign ministers' meeting of France, Egypt, Jordan, and Germany, hosted by the latter's foreign minister, registered their alarm at the scale of violence and called for the resumption of peace negotiations that should lead to a two-state solution. The German foreign ministry spokesman added that "The people of Gaza and Israel have a right to live in peace and dignity."<sup>14</sup> By the end of July, Hamas and Israel again traded rockets and

missiles, with the latter carrying out its biggest military operation in years. The German foreign ministry reaffirmed Israel's right to self-defense, but once again called for "proportionality," this time citing international law. At the same time, the EU, France, the UK, and Germany voiced their "great concern" over the July passage in the Knesset of the law to effectively neuter the judiciary.

In October 2023, Hamas unleashed the deadliest terrorist attack on Israel since the Holocaust with at least 1,200 killed in southern Israel and about 200 taken hostage in Gaza. By the end of November, Israeli counterattacks had killed about 15,000 Gazans, although a full-scale ground invasion was delayed for a while. Although this strife is on-going at the time of publication, the German government's response has been in accordance with the patterns discussed in this essay. Chancellor Scholz was the first foreign head of government to visit Israel after the attacks.<sup>15</sup> Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock noted: "We stand in unwavering solidarity with Israel in the fight against Hamas. Israel has the right to defend itself against the Hamas terror—within the parameters laid down by international law for such exceptional situations."<sup>16</sup>

### Governmental Institutions: The *Zeitenwende* and Military Ties

At the same time as German criticism abroad of settlement activity, settler violence, and intermittent bombardments of Gaza, at home Germany was instituting a new concept of security. Occasioned by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, German foreign and security policy was undergoing a paradigm shift (*Zeitenwende*) that had positive implications for the German-Israeli partnership. In February 2022, Scholz announced a 1 billion euro fund so Germany could revamp its armed forces to be better prepared for the new geopolitical realities introduced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Already in March 2022, Scholz and Bennett announced a new institution, a "strategic dialogue" between Germany and Israel, which would take place bi-annually among high-level security, intelligence, and diplomatic officials. The first meeting

occurred in September 2022; it took the "two nations' cooperation to new heights."<sup>17</sup> The export of weapons, as opposed to discussions, had continued with the Israeli agreement at the beginning of 2021 to deliver the Trophy active protection system to enhance technologically Germany's tank-fighting capacity. By January 2022, there was a new deal, worth 3 billion euros, for three cutting-edge German submarines to Israel. In April 2022, the two defense ministries and the Israel Aerospace Industries launched discussions aimed at negotiating an agreement to procure Israel's Arrow air defense system, which could protect Germany against Russian missiles and would cost some 3 billion euros. Israel's arms industry is quickly becoming a fulcrum of Germany's security modernization. Militarily, the two armed forces are ever more intertwined. Joint flyovers of Dachau and the Negev by German and Israeli pilots have expressed the depth and breadth of that interweaving. The Israeli export of weapons systems to Germany will be a boost to the Israeli economy. For some years already, Germany was Israel's most important general trading partner in Europe. Germany was the second biggest supplier of weapons to Israel, representing 24 percent of Israel's arms imports between 2009-2020.

In addition to the practical nature of the military ties today, there is also a second, more philosophical outcome of Germany's security and foreign policy recasting. Since the mid-1950s when the defense ties began, the two countries have held very different conceptions of power, with Germany projecting soft, largely economic power and Israel attached to expressions of hard, military power.<sup>18</sup> With the sea change in Germany's security posture toward hard power, the two countries are more compatible in their thinking.

### Middle East Policy in the Context of the EU

Germany's projection of soft and economic power dovetailed with its preference for multilateralism, particularly in the EU. In this decade, Israel continued to see the EU as hostile to its political and military ambitions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but sometimes Germany could soften the

blow. In July 2014, during the Gaza War, the EU Council was particularly appalled “by the human cost of the Israeli military operation” but also condemned Hamas’ rocket attacks against Israel.<sup>19</sup> In December 2014, the chancellor had rejected an EU proposal to recognize a Palestinian state in principle, arguing that formal peace negotiations were the appropriate forum for such an initiative. Both the German chancellor and the German foreign minister repeated earlier sentiments: Israel had the primordial right to defend itself, but the response should be proportionate. Chancellor Merkel was willing to chastise Israel for the failure of peace talks by rejecting a subsidy (not the sale at full price) for Israeli purchase of German gunboats.

Once again, Germany sought to mitigate the consequences in other ways. In 2015, the European Commission started to insist that goods from the settlements in the West Bank be labelled as such, so that consumers had the choice whether to purchase those goods. This restriction became law in 2019 when the European Court of Justice upheld the rule and stated that goods from the occupied territories could not be marketed as products of Israel. But the EU did not subscribe to the more stringent, growing international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions system, to which Merkel had voiced opposition on numerous occasions.

When Germany held the presidency of the EU Council in July-December 2020, it was well-placed to advance Israel’s interests, for example by promising in October 2020 to share any future Europe-only COVID-19 vaccine with Israel. For these purposes “Germany [saw] Israel as part of Europe.”<sup>20</sup> When the Israeli government actively promoted settlement activity in the occupied territories, the EU drew up punitive consequences if Israel annexed the area, but Germany staved off the stricter measures.

German partiality toward Israel was demonstrated by Foreign Minister Heiko Mass’ August 2020 invitation to his Israeli counterpart to attend an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers. While the tone of the EU-Israel relationship improved after this meeting, a gathering of the EU-Israel Association

Council would have to wait (for international and Middle East political reasons, and the fact of the pandemic) until October 2022; the Council had last met in 2012. Prior to the 2022 meeting there had been a flurry of EU visits to Israel and vice versa. There was the promise that new areas of agreements would emerge from the intensification of ties and the opportunity to acknowledge the other’s grievances. However, events in the Middle East, including a new round of the Gaza-Israel conflict and Israel’s domestic upheaval were a barrier to further expansion of ties. The EU was loathe to interfere in Israeli domestic politics but stood by its position that the only answer to the violence of both parties to the conflict was the negotiation of a two-state solution. All the while that chaos reigned in the Middle East during this period, Germans, the EU, and Israelis communicated intensively. Personal exchanges could help build up habits of cooperation and mutual learning.

### Civil Society

We had noted earlier the role of youth exchange in promoting mutual understanding; in this period another channel for learning about the other, the German-Israeli Textbook Commission (organized and coordinated by the Georg Eckert Institute), announced its findings. Institutionalized exchanges between Germany and Israel on the content of textbooks in history and geography date back to the 1970s, and a first bilateral commission was created in 1979. Recommendations for textbook content were presented in 1985, and in 2010, a new bilateral textbook commission was formed. Experts on both sides examined textbooks that are read by pupils in various stages of post-elementary education. The main purpose of revising textbooks was to correct inaccuracies and fill in lacunae for young people as part of furthering the special relationship. The 2015 bilateral Commission results showed an imbalance between the two countries: In Israeli textbooks, Germany was viewed as a political “role model” and *primus inter pares* in the EU. However, German textbooks were considered “one-sided”: Israel is seen “as ... only ... a conflict state,” with little else about its history and domestic achievements.<sup>21</sup> The Commission issued a new set of recommendations to German and Israeli offi-

cialdom in June 2023. They emphasized that both German and Israeli textbooks were largely objective, while faulting both sides for inaccuracies, omissions, and distortions. The Israeli books were naturally preoccupied with National Socialism but also with medieval and enlightenment Germany, to the detriment of addressing the post-1945 period. The depiction of Israel in German textbooks was often built around images that saw Israel as “the aggressor.” Both sets of materials needed to allow “pupils [to] objectively weigh up different perspectives.”<sup>22</sup>

If the assumption is correct that students gain some of their information, ideas, and facts from textbooks, then the 2023 German-Israeli Textbook Commission’s findings may help us understand German public attitudes toward Israel in the decade 2013-2023, especially among young people. By 2013-14, there appeared to be a further decline in positive attitudes toward Israel compared to the previous period: According to a BBC survey,<sup>23</sup> only 11 percent of German respondents considered Israel’s influence in the world as positive, whereas a distinct majority of 67 percent viewed it as negative.

There were also more wide-ranging data collected in 2013 (published in 2015) by the Bertelsmann Foundation,<sup>24</sup> but with a different reading: here only 23 percent responded that Jews had too much influence in the world. 35 percent of Germans surveyed believed Israeli policy toward the Palestinians was akin to Nazi policy toward the Jews—a reflection of anti-Semitism for the authors of the study. In Germany, 58 percent of respondents believed that the past “be consigned to history,” whereas only 38 percent disagreed. 77 percent of Israelis agreed that the past should stay alive. The survey’s authors were particularly concerned that “the younger generation in both countries displays a tendency toward estrangement”: A full 80 percent of Israelis over 50 saw Germany in a positive light, whereas the figure for people under 30 stood at only 53 percent. Only 36 percent of Germans had a positive stance toward Israel with 48 percent viewing Israel in a poor light, whereas this last figure increased to 54 percent in the 18-29 age category.

Bertelsmann repeated the survey in 2021 (published in 2022).<sup>25</sup> 24 percent of Germans said Jews have too much influence in the world, similar to the result in 2013. The figure among Germans for equating Israeli policy toward the Palestinians with Nazi policy toward the Jews remained the same. The discrepancy between German and Israeli views of the relationship persisted. 46 percent of Germans saw Israel in a favorable light with 34 percent having a negative opinion. In Israel, a significant majority of 63 percent saw Germany positively, with only 19 percent expressing a poor opinion. On the question of whether Germany had an indelible responsibility for present-day Israel, the affirmative figure decreased in Israel to 60 percent, with the German figure at only 33 percent, a decline compared to the 2013 result. 58 percent of Israelis believed Germany had a responsibility to the Jewish people, but only 27 percent of Germans agreed. Again, the authors were concerned about the “striking” gap in attitudes between German and Israeli youth: 44 percent of young Germans agreed that Germany has a responsibility for the Jewish people whereas the Israeli figure was 53 percent.

Current polls from April and July 2023 tell a similar story about German youth: According to the European Leadership Network survey,<sup>26</sup> focusing only on German opinion, 60 percent of Germans see the German-Israeli relationship as special, but among young people the figure at 48 percent is much lower. The July YouGov Eurotrack poll<sup>27</sup> focuses on attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict specifically. A very large 73 percent of Germans have indicated that the conflict is not on their radar. On which side of the conflict they support, the numbers are noteworthy for their meagerness: 17 percent express more sympathy for the Israelis and 15 percent support the Palestinian side more. 59 percent of Germans support a two-state solution.

On the whole, Israelis have possessed more positive attitudes to Germany than Germans have to Israel, a remarkable feat just eighty years after the Holocaust. This aligns with the Israeli government’s view, pronounced by Israel’s new ambassador to Germany in September 2022, that Germany is

## Israel's second-best strategic partner after the United States.<sup>28</sup>

### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Deutschland.de, "Angela Merkel on 50 Years of German-Israeli Relations," Deutschland.de at: <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/angela-merkel-on-50-years-of-german-israeli-relations>.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Raphael Ahren, "During 'Nadir' in Ties, Merkel to Bring Entire Cabinet to Israel," *The Times of Israel*, February 19, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ynet interview, op. cit.

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Dan Verbin, "Israel's Ambassador to Germany asks Gov to Protect Jewish Community," *Israel National News*, May 14, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *Deutsche Welle*, "German Foreign Minister Slams 'Massive' Attacks on Israel," *Deutsche Welle*, May 20, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Herb Keinin, "Merkel's Trips to Israel at Start and End of Tenure not a Coincidence – Analysis," *Jerusalem Post*, October 11, 2021.

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Tovah Lazaroff, "Should Israel heed German warnings about a failing democracy? – analysis," *Jerusalem Post*, March 19, 2023 at: <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-734762>.

<sup>14</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, "Erklärungen des Auswärtigen Amtes in der Regierungspressekonferenz vom 10.05.2023," at: <https://auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/regierungspressekonferenz/2596224>.

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<sup>16</sup> German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Minister Baerbock to travel once again to the Middle East," October 18, 2023. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/-/2627680>

<sup>17</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Israel and Germany hold first Strategic Dialogue," Press Release, September 2, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the different conceptions of power, see Berenskötter and Mitrani, "Is It Friendship?" op.cit.

<sup>19</sup> Council of the European Union, "Council Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process. Foreign Affairs Council meeting," July 22, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Toby Axelrod, "Germany would share Europe-only COVID vaccine with Israel," October 15, 2020 at: <https://www.jpost.com/health-science/germany-would-share-europe-only-covid-vaccine-with-israel-645773>.

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<sup>25</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung, "Israelis have a more positive view of Germany than Germans do of Israel," September 2, 2022 at: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/topics/latest-news/2022/september/israelis-have-a-more-positive-view-of-germany-than-germans-do-of-israel>; *The Times of Israel*, "Poll: 1 in 3 Germans say Israel treating Palestinians like Nazis did Jews," September 2, 2022 at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-1-in-3-germans-have-poor-view-of-israel-dont-see-responsibility-toward-jews/>.

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew Smith, "Attitudes to the Israel-Palestine conflict in Western Europe and the USA in 2023," You Gov Eurotrack Poll, July 3, 2023 at: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2023/07/03/attitudes-israel-palestine-conflict-western-europe>.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Lazar Berman, "Germany is Israel's most important ally after US, says new envoy in Berlin," *The Times of Israel*, September 12, 2022, at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/Germany-is-israels-most-important-ally-after-us-says-new-envoy-in-berlin/>.

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## CONCLUSION

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- The special relationship is manifested in preferential policies and institutions, but also in remembrance of the past through commemorations, statements, and visits.
- Pragmatism and morality as motives have combined for all German chancellors, but the weight assigned to each element has differed over time. For parts of the German public, morality today is increasingly cast in new terms: Does Israel pursue Nazi-like conduct towards the Palestinians?
- There are two sets of actors who have performed as catalysts for the special relationship: governments and civil society. Their interaction and coordination should increase to add more dynamism to the relationship.
- The German-Israeli special relationship has been dotted with full-blown confrontations and mini-crises. Crises seem necessary to authenticate the relationship and to move to the next level. Political differences can be ameliorated by granting preferences in other areas, especially the military. Policy preferences and institutions run the gamut of cooperative ties, such that virtually every German ministry has an active connection and history with its Israeli counterpart.
- German governments acknowledge the horror of the past and honor the victims and survivors, but these acts will become more difficult as the Holocaust witness generation in both Germany and Israel disappears. Germany and Israel must think hard now about how to perpetuate the relationship in the future. The negative attitudes of young Germans will render this task harder. The governments must re-energize their youth through joint activities. German history should remain a topic of exchange, but young people in both countries need to be able to draw universal lessons from the past as they respond to the myriad challenges facing the globe now and in the future.
- For the most part, German public opinion has not been overwhelmingly supportive of Israel on a variety of different measures. Ironically, Israelis are much more positive to Germans than the other way around.
- The EU has served as an important vehicle for Germany to protect and advance Israel's economic interests. While Germany has not been able to prevent harsh EU policies, it has managed quite regularly to prevent what Israel sees as the worst political outcomes. The bilateral and multilateral tracks have run alongside one another.
- The German-Israeli special relationship has been relatively stable during the last four decades, but there are new challenges: Germany will rely on Israel for some essential parts of its new security modernization, which is new and positive. But Israel is at war with itself and the Palestinians. The Palestinians are internally divided. The peace process is moribund. German public opinion has been more vocal in its negative attitudes toward Israel and apathetic about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The overall relationship could be entering a new phase of stability, mirroring the military partnership, or it could become brittle. Right now, we are at an inflection point with no certainty about its direction. One certainty does remain, however: the American-German Institute will continue to focus on memory politics and German-Jewish relations in its research and public affairs work.



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The Knesset parliament building in Jerusalem  
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Reichstag building seen from west, Berlin, Germany  
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