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Was It to No Avail?

50 Years German-Israeli Diplomatic Relations

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Twenty years after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany, the late Ambassador of Israel to Germany (1974-1981) Yohanan Meroz, published a book (originally published in German) with the Hebrew title “Was It to No Avail?” Ambassador Meroz, who was one of the best and brightest diplomats of the Israeli Foreign Service, dedicated almost twenty-five years of his career to shaping the relationship. For a person like him to question the efforts that were invested by Israel into establishing diplomatic relations was quite telling. Meroz’s doubts have to be seen in the context of the *Zeitgeist* that prevailed in Germany in the early 1980s with respect to the question of coming to terms with the past. Those were the times of discussing the “Auschwitz Lie” legislation; the memorial service for Wehrmacht soldiers at Bitburg; the controversial remarks by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt concerning the moral responsibility of Germany (or the lack thereof vis-à-vis Jews); and Schmidt’s plan to sell tanks to the Saudis, which triggered an undiplomatic reaction (to put it mildly) by the late Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. Against this backdrop, one could understand Meroz’s sense of despair. Is the question that Meroz raised still relevant in 2015, five decades after relations were established? Was it the right decision?

There is no doubt in my mind that the decision made in the early 1950s by Prime Minister David Ben Gurion to reach out to Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (whom he saw as the representative of the “other Germany”), and the steps that were taken later to establish relations, was the right one for Israel to make. One would expect that, given the Shoah, establishing relations with Israel would have been a foregone conclusion for Germany, considering the “moral benefits” that it would accrue. That, however, was not the case. In fact, Germany had “stumbled” into establishing the official, diplomatic relationship in May 1965. The attitude toward Israel on diplomatic relations until then had been determined by the Hallstein Doctrine, and Israel’s request for formal recognition had been subordinated to Germany’s broader interests in the Middle East.

Looking back at the five decades of relations, one could unequivocally say that the two states have come a long way. Taking stock of the relationship will reveal how close and intensive ties have become at the political, military, economic, scientific, youth, and civil society levels, so much so that they can be characterized as unique (and not, as many mistakenly tend to describe them, as merely special). The reason for the uniqueness derives solely from the Shoah. Had it not been for the Shoah, Israel

and Germany would never have had the kind of the relationship that we have today. As a result, the Israeli side has occasionally developed expectations that were not always met by the German government, thereby leading time and again to crisis (for example, in the early 1960s over the German scientist that helped Egypt to build rockets; in the 1970s over German neutrality in the Yom Kippur war; in the 1980s over the German intention to sell tanks to Saudi Arabia; in the 1990s over the involvement of German companies in helping Iraq set up its chemical industry). In recent years, we have seen an opposite trend, namely, German expectations of Israel to make progress toward implementing the Two State solution (an expectation that the Israeli government has not fulfilled, thereby leading to a crisis of trust). The crises described notwithstanding, one is tempted to say that, given their comprehensiveness, the relations have become normal. The question of whether the relationship has become normal has occupied parts of German society, not only the elite, since the establishment of relations. Clearly, defining relations with Israel as “normal” would have granted the Germans the legitimacy (some sort of a clean bill of health) that they sought. The Israelis, on the other hand, have never spent too much time discussing the issue of normalcy. Some, like the writer Amos Oz, went as far as to say that “normal relations between Germany and Israel are impossible and inappropriate.”

Be that as it may, a closer look at the relationship over the years also reveals that the asymmetries in the relations outweigh the symmetries—and not only because of the fundamental asymmetry between the victims and the perpetrators. From this point of view, the festivities to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations serve as facade behind which a slightly different reality is hiding.

A few examples will serve to demonstrate the above-mentioned assumption, starting with the lessons that the two societies have learned from their pasts. The primacy of “never again” has different operational meaning for Germans and Israelis. “Never again shall we be victims and be at the mercy of others” is the lesson that the Israelis have learned (with all its implications that are manifested in the way, often described as stubborn, that Israel conducts its foreign and defense policies). For the Germans, “never again” means “never again will a war be launched by Germany (and from German soil).” Related to that is the asymmetry regarding the use of force which stems from the different environments and, as a result, two different threat perceptions that compel Israel to act differently than Germany.

As for the role of religion, whereas in Israel religion plays a growing role in the identity of the state (with a growing number of Israeli Jews emphasizing the role of the Jewish character of the state over its democratic character), in Germany, the role of religion in defining the identity of the state/society has been on the decline. Tied to that is the decline of the idea of the nation-state in Germany as part of the European Union (the current crisis over Greece notwithstanding) versus its central importance in Israel as the only Jewish state (that therefore needs to be preserved).

For the Israelis, the Shoah continues to play a central role in the Israeli political culture (not to mention the fact that that it is sometimes instrumentalized, if not misused, by the right wing government). By contrast, among the younger German generation and the growing number of immigrants of Islamic background, the willingness to carry the burden of the Shoah is declining.

A closer look reveals a growing gap—if not estrangement—of German civil society from Israel. The process of gradual but steady erosion of the image of Israel started already at the beginning of the 1980s (not to mention the stereotypes of Jews known from the Nazi period that have persisted in some quarters of German society even after the end of the war). According to public opinion polls, less than 50 percent of Germans have a positive opinion of Israel. It is interesting to note that while Israelis differentiate between the Germans of the Nazi period and the Germans of today, Germans make no distinction between Israeli politics and the society at large at all.

According to the latest Bertelsmann Foundation findings, almost 80 percent of young Germans refuse to shoulder the burden of the crimes committed against the Jews. Asked whether, in view of the Shoah, Germany bears a special responsibility to Israel, again almost 80 percent answered negatively. Every eighth person in Germany denies Israel's right to exist.

In stark opposition to the German perception is the Israeli perception of the Germans. Polls conducted by the Köbner Institute for German Studies at the Hebrew University show that 85 percent of Israelis consider the relations between the two countries as normal and that today's Germany is different from the Germany of the Nazi period. Fifty-four percent consider Germany as an honest broker when it comes to dealing with political matters at the international level. Altogether, one can say that the sympathy among the Israelis toward Germany is continuously growing, as opposed to the downward trend toward Israel in German society.

But not only that, we face in Germany another domestic asymmetry which concerns the growing gap between the public at large and the political elite (which was and still is the prime driver of the relationship on both sides). The German elite, conscious of Germany's history, continues to express its commitment to Israel's security and right to exist (with Chancellor Merkel adding as a Jewish state in the context of the Two State solution). Furthermore, it was Chancellor Merkel who went as far as to speak about Israel's security as a part of Germany's *raison d'état* (*Staatsraison*) at a time when the public is turning away from Israel. (Merkel's statements have to be seen in the context of the Iranian efforts to acquire a nuclear capability and the threat that it will pose to Israel in view of Iranian threats to obliterate Israel. The recent conclusion of an agreement between the P5+1 will, from the German viewpoint, contribute to Israel's security the way Germany defines it. Given Israel's opposition to the agreement, we may see differences between the two governments.) The wider the gap becomes, the more difficult it becomes for the political elite to seek legitimacy for its policies regarding Israel.

In conclusion, some describe the achievement in the last five decades since the establishment of diplomatic relations as a "miracle." To believe that what has been achieved was caused by a "divine intervention in human affairs" is misleading. What has been achieved against the backdrop of the Shoah was due to a combination of historic leadership on both sides and moral and *Realpolitik* considerations. It was not self-evident that the relationship would come as far as it has come. Being an elite project, the future of relations will depend on the extent to which the German elite will continue to view German commitment to Israel's existence and security as a tenet of German foreign policy at a time of a growing estrangement of the German public from Israel. With the generational change and the fading memory of the Shoah as the

cornerstone for the unique relations, it will be incumbent upon the two states to shape a remembrance culture. That said, it is clear to me that the Shoah pillar will not be sufficient in preserving what has been achieved so far, let alone to expand the relationship. Israel and Germany will have to identify new areas of common interests. In view of the common challenges that the two societies face, it should not be that difficult. Germany will remain for Israel a strategic partner and as such Israel will do well to reduce to the extent possible the areas of dissent (first and foremost in the political domain), thereby helping to reduce the number of asymmetries that do not bode well for the future of relations.

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