

INSS Insight No. 1030, March 7, 2018

Germany-Israel Relations: Unique or Normal?

Shimon Stein

Last year's decision by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to postpone the annual consultations between the governments of Israel and Germany, which was seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the Israeli government regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the decision to suspend signing the contract on the sale of submarines from Germany to Israel for reasons that commentators saw as linked to the same dissatisfaction; German votes in the UN in recent years on matters relating to Israel; statements by German officials regarding the future of relations between the two countries; and a speech by German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel at the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS) annual conference in January 2018 – all these indicate a change in Germany's attitude to Israel. What is this change? Does it reflect a trend, and if so, what can be done to maintain the unique nature of the relationship?

The main and in fact the only factor underlying the unique relationship between Israel and Germany is the memory of the Holocaust, and the commitment that Germany consequently made to Israel's existence and security. This rationale has guided Germany's decision makers in their conduct with Israel since the start of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The uniqueness found expression in its (almost unshakable) support for Israel at both the bilateral and international levels. It was based on a moral German consideration, while considerations of realpolitik (that did indeed play a part in the considerations of West Germany in the years prior to the start of diplomatic relations, and delayed these relations) played a secondary role for a long time. Yet notwithstanding this overriding element in the relations, there have been crises deriving from Israeli expectations that Germany failed to meet. Crises surrounding reparations in the early 1950s, the German scientists in Egypt in the early 1960s, German neutrality during the Yom Kippur War, the Helmut Schmidt- Menachem Begin crisis because of Germany's intention to supply Leopard tanks to Saudi Arabia, and German assistance to Iraq in the construction chemical industry, which enabled it to develop military chemical capability, are examples of such incidents.

Since the start of the twenty-first century, there have been signs of a crisis of expectations on Germany's part toward Israel, which derives primarily from Israel's conduct in the conflict with the Palestinians, which as Germany sees it, is not compatible with international law, which is a basic foundation of German foreign policy. Add to that is

the absence of trust that has developed over the years between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Chancellor Merkel. Moreover, this crisis is not confined to the German elite. For some years, and even more so lately, polls have pointed to a decline in German public opinion toward support for Israel. A senior German official told me while he does not expect a change on the part of the current elite's attitudes to Israel, the younger generation may show greater understanding of the Palestinian side and be more critical of Israel's actions (assuming that the conflict is not resolved).

Against these developments, it appears that in the tension between uniqueness and normalcy, there is a trend that can be characterized as the ritualization of uniqueness, alongside a broadening of normalcy in relations. In other words, if in the past the ritualization of memory of the Holocaust weakened realpolitik considerations for Germany, today it is not enough to counter them.

Since historical memory and consequently Germany's moral obligation to the existence and security of the State of Israel is what underlay the bilateral relations, the question of the contribution of these relations to German interests in the Middle East was not at the focus of German calculations (although this does not mean that Germany did not derive and continues to derive benefits from its cooperation with Israel). However, the emerging reality was recently summed up by a member of the German government who said that relations are developing in a direction where realpolitik will be the basis of cooperation between the countries. If so, there is no reason to see the topics currently on the agenda of both countries as evidence of a unique relationship or strategic partnership, but as cooperation that is the fruit of shared interests, of the kind that Israel has with a number of countries. After all, strategic partnership is based inter alia on a shared view of threats and ways of dealing with them, as well as on shared values. The widening gaps in recent years between Germany and Israel are evidence that these are not the basis of the relationship between the two countries.

Evidence of these gaps can be found in bilateral meetings of recent years, where discussions of matters of shared interest reveal differences of opinion, some seemingly unbridgeable. There are also official statements from German politicians who no longer feel the "historical" inhibitions against criticizing Israeli positions. Some examples: substantial disagreements over how to handle the Iranian nuclear threat - in particular, against the background of the nuclear agreement to which Germany was a partner, and German assessments of the Iranian threat in general, which differ Israel's; differences of opinion regarding the overall Middle East situation and its implications - including the Saudi-Iranian crisis and ways of dealing with it (Germany has reservations about the benefits to Israel of greater closeness with the Sunni camp in the struggle against the Shiite camp); and disagreements on the Palestinian issue, which casts a heavy shadow

over the future of relations. The speech by Foreign Minister Gabriel at the INSS conference pointed to the German position (and in fact the position of the European Union): "What exactly is Israel's strategy regarding this dispute," was Gabriel's central question, in view of the absence of responses to questions such as "the nature of the shared lives of Israelis and Palestinians in the future – a question that challenges Israel in terms of security and values." He later referred to elements in Israeli society who are not convinced that this is an urgent challenge, and who think it is possible to maintain the status quo: "How do you want the future of Israel to look? Are you prepared to pay the price of ongoing annexation, of a one-state reality with unequal rights for its citizens, or one democratic state between the river and the sea?" Such statements are rarely heard from people in the German government. In a closed forum where the Palestinian issue was discussed, one German figure said, "In the past we could separate bilateral relations from the dispute, but today that is becoming harder."

Is this implying that Israel's conduct regarding the Palestinian conflict, namely, the degree of progress toward a two-state solution, will become the cornerstone of German willingness to promote bilateral relations? The commitment to Israel's security (described by Chancellor Merkel as part of Germany's *staatsraison*) that Germany has faithfully implemented for many years is not unshakable, and depends on Israel's conduct. This is shown by the German government's decision to suspend signing an agreement on the sale of submarines to Israel, in response to Israel's actions on the issue of settlements.

The gap between the two countries also finds expression in the issue of "common values." A fundamental principle guiding German international relations is the preservation of international law – rule based order, which underpins the liberal world order. The illegality of the settlements in the West Bank under international law and in Germany's view, as well as Israel's conduct on the subject of human rights, are a focus of dispute where no solution is visible on the horizon. The war against terror joins this issue. Germany has adopted a holistic approach for handling this problem, while Israel focuses its main efforts on the military aspect. Israel's efforts in recent decades to explain to their German (European) counterparts why it acts as it does has met consistently with the charge of Israel's illegal moves. The same historical memory that for many years was the foundation of German support for Israel is what today enables Germany to criticize Israeli policy on ethical issues.

At the end of his speech at INSS, Gabriel talked about Germany's recognition of its historical responsibility and the precious and special link that his country feels toward Israel. This type of statement, which is typical of how German politicians start or end their speeches, also seems to be a way of giving legitimacy to their (more or less harsh) criticisms of Israeli government policy.

In conclusion, without the memory of the Holocaust, there would be no special relationship between Germany and Israel. This memory was the core of the original relationship. However, the place of memory in German policy considerations regarding Israel is slipping, in part due to the growing distance from the Holocaust and generational changes. Identifying the new elements, based on common interests, will become a guiding factor for Germany. Alongside shared interests, there are gaps in the assessment of threats and how to deal with them, as well as ethical gaps. These place a question mark over the prospects of a shared strategic partnership. As relations between the two countries become more normal, so the ritual/symbolic dimension, namely Germany's need to stress the historical dimension, will decline. Thus underway is an irreversible process, in which undoubtedly a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would reduce friction and allow for closer normal relations between the two countries.