



The jubilee balance

50 years after the establishment of ties with Germany, Israel benefits from bilateral relations on a wide spectrum of issues

SEVEN YEARS after concluding his term as Israel's ambassador to Germany in 1981, Yohanan Meroz published a book entitled "Was It All in Vain?". For over two decades Meroz had played a pivotal role in defining the new Israel-Germany relationship and he was haunted by the question of whether, given the specter of the Holocaust past and developments in the two countries since, the effort to establish formal diplomatic ties with the "new Germany" was justified.

Fifty years after the establishment of relations, the question mark can be safely removed. It is clear that in light of the distance both countries have traveled and the benefits Israel has reaped, former prime minister David Ben-Gurion was right in deciding, despite fierce opposition, on a process leading to full ties.

A cold analysis of mutual interests points to an impressive balance of bilateral relations on a wide spectrum of issues. Apart from the US, there is no country with which Israel maintains such extensive ties on both the government and civil society levels.

On the face of it, it would seem that the two countries have achieved full normalization in just 50 years. But that is hardly the case. The Holocaust or "the civilizational rupture" continues to shape the delicate relationship. Without the Holocaust, Germany would not have established unique relations with Israel, unlike any it has with other countries. This is especially true of its defense ties with Israel – which include the supply of Dolphin-class submarines, reportedly capable of firing nuclear weapons.

In its ties with Germany, Israel was guided by considerations of realpolitik or national interest; the considerations that guided Germany, which acknowledged responsibility for Nazi crimes against the Jewish people, were of a moral, atoning character. This fundamental moral commitment led generations of German leaders to declare their support for Israel's right to exist and, more recently, to exist as a Jewish state in the context of a two-state solution with the Palestinians. This moral imperative also entails an unwavering commitment to Israel's security which, according to Chancellor Angela Merkel, is part of Germany's "raison d'être."

Nevertheless, the relationship remains complex and not always harmonious. In the early years before the establishment of diplomatic relations and in the following decades, there was a string of crises, which derived from Israeli expectations Germany failed to live up to, especially with regard to conduct in the Middle East impacting on Israel's security – for example, German scientists assisting Egypt to build missiles, German neutrality in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, German plans to supply tanks to Saudi Arabia, and German aid to Iraq's Saddam Hussein in building up his chemical weapons arsenal.



WOLFGANG RATTAY / REUTERS

According to Chancellor Angela Merkel, the commitment to Israel's security is part of Germany's 'raison d'être'

Recently, there have been tensions deriving from German expectations of Israeli conduct on the Palestinian issue. Germany is strongly opposed to Israeli policies that seem to undermine efforts to reach a two-state solution which, in the German view, would enhance Israel's security and help secure its future as a Jewish and democratic state. A sign of German displeasure can be seen in the fact that, unlike in the past, Merkel has gone public over her differences with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The German political elite's commitment toward Israel has never received wide public backing in Germany. The ongoing erosion in public support for Israel and its increasingly negative image stand in stark contrast to the positive view of Germany in Israel.

Nevertheless, German government commitment to Israel in the international arena has not wavered. It remains almost always steadfast in the UN and its agencies, and especially in Europe. Germany has often blocked or mitigated on its own anti-Israel resolutions in EU institutions on peace process related issues.

Should the deadlock on the Palestinian track continue, many EU states will press to ratchet up the pressure on Israel, seen to be at least partly responsible for the ongoing stalemate. Although it shares much of the criticism of Israel, Germany is likely to temper any decisions or actions taken. For example, it will not support or implement resolutions calling for a boycott of Israeli goods.

The historic memory will act as a brake. ■

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