

Deciphering Germany's Pro-Israel Consensus



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Germany's complex relationship to the issue of Palestine is often explained in terms of the country's past and its consequent affinity for Israel as the perceived homeland of Holocaust survivors. German policy decisions in the last two decades, including the sale of nuclear-capable submarines to Israel, seem to confirm this view. That notwithstanding, argues this article, Germany's Middle East policy and popular German perceptions of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis must be placed in a more contemporary historical context of evolving political priorities. The article contends that the current political class' zealous identification with Israel is a qualitatively new phenomenon in Germany largely unrelated to moral considerations pertaining to the Nazi era. In addition to examining how this identification plays out more broadly in society, the article also attempts to locate possible fissures that could give rise to changes in official policy.

THE EUROZONE CRISIS has set the stage for the emergence of Germany as Europe's unchallenged hegemon. As the country strives for a political role in global affairs to match its economic power, its involvement in the Middle East, both within and outside the framework of the European Union (EU), can reasonably be expected to grow in the near future. This thesis is lent all the more credence by the unpredictable foreign policy of the United States under President Donald Trump, increasing pressure on Germany to assume the leadership of a liberal world order whose declared outlook in the Palestine dispute is guided by the vision of a two-state solution.

As one of its biggest donors, Germany already maintains a vested interest in the Palestinian Authority. At the same time, the country preserves its strategic commitment to Israel, manifested in the supply of nuclear-capable submarines to Tel Aviv. In addition, it plays a leading role within an EU that nowadays refrains from a unified position on the conflict, as member-states become increasingly interdependent with Israel economically. Germany is thus a highly important albeit less vocal player in the Zionist-Palestinian conflict in contrast to the United States, Britain, or France.

Social and historical factors have played outsized roles in shaping Germany's official policy on Israel/Palestine, with the conflict viewed primarily from the prism of Germany's responsibility to Israel as the legal and moral representative of Jews victimized by the Nazi regime. This responsibility is widely understood as rendering impermissible any criticism of Israeli policies. At best, such

criticism is acceptable only from the standpoint of Israel's interests as a self-declared "Jewish and democratic" state. Such thinking is not the exclusive purview of the conservative Right; it has also been adopted by center-left segments of the political spectrum. Upholding Israel's vaguely defined "right to exist"¹ has thus transformed into an entry ticket for legitimate discourse, something that political forces across the spectrum have come to understand over the years. In trying to illuminate the character of current German attitudes to Palestine and Israel, this article reviews the evolution of bilateral relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel since the late 1940s, when both states came into existence. The outcome of these relations inevitably impacts the Palestinians, whether those living under occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, those subject to a precarious citizenship status within the state of Israel, or those refugees in the diaspora.

The article attempts to answer four interrelated questions: First, how did the relatively recent phenomenon come about of a ritualized commitment to Israel by Germany's political class? Second, is the "consensus on Israel" merely derivative of German Middle East policy? Third, does the official discourse on Israel and Palestine reflect actual trends in German public opinion? And fourth, what is the potential for a change in Germany's traditionally accommodating policies towards Israel? This article argues that the growing importance of Israel in public discourse is related to both the process of "normalization" in German foreign policy since 1990, and rising anti-Muslim racism throughout Europe, in which the acceptance of "Israel's right to exist" has become a precondition for joining the German national collective.

Ideological Foundations of the German-Israeli Alliance

The official position of every country on the question of Palestine is essentially defined by its attitude toward Israel—the sole actor in control of the entirety of historical Palestine and the only party to the conflict that enjoys full recognition, as well as rights and obligations, under international law. Germany's attitude toward the Palestinians must therefore be regarded as directly derivative of its ties to Israel.

During the Cold War, relations between the Federal Republic and Israel were subsumed in a three-way relationship that included the United States and fluctuated depending on the state of U.S.-German and/or U.S.-Israeli ties. Covert military support for Israel in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with the Federal Republic's belligerence towards the Eastern Bloc. But Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik in the 1970s, which resulted in U.S.-German relations being less closely aligned, rendered overt German support for Israel a liability, as Bonn also sought closer ties to Arab oil-producing countries to meet its growing energy demands. Where heightened Cold War tensions had brought Germany and Israel closer, their easing resulted in a more evenhanded German stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict, ushering in the recognition of Palestinian concerns. In contrast to the often-conflicting dynamics that inform Germany's stance on Israel, the motivators of the alliance on the Israeli side have remained constant: to secure vital German financial, military, and political support.

The signing of the Luxembourg Agreement in 1952 between West Germany's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, and his Israeli counterpart, David Ben-Gurion, signaled the official launch of bilateral relations. Holocaust reparations enabling the moral rehabilitation of the Federal Republic

was to form the backbone of the future alliance between the two states. While politically significant for West Germany, the agreement was particularly beneficial to Israel. It is widely accepted today that German economic aid was instrumental in laying the foundations of the new Israeli state at a time when U.S. material support was far from unconditional.² Alongside financial support was also wide-ranging cooperation in intelligence and military affairs, which saw West Germany covertly supplying U.S. arms to Israel.³

The dual context of the Cold War and decolonization hampered normal diplomatic relations, however. In those early years, West German foreign policy centered on preventing recognition of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) by a growing number of newly emerging nonaligned nations while preserving cordial relations with the Arab states. Nevertheless, Israel gained powerful behind-the-scenes advocates within the West German establishment, including Bavaria's Chancellor Franz Josef Strauss, a mainstay of right-wing conservatism and an advocate of so-called German Gaullism.⁴ For Adenauer and Strauss, Israel was a strategic asset in the global anti-Soviet crusade, especially as U.S. inclinations toward *détente* began to manifest after the 1956 Suez Crisis.

Ardent support for Israel did not prevent the presence of former Nazis at every echelon of the West German state, most infamously Hans Globke, who coauthored the Third Reich's Nuremberg Race Laws and was a top Adenauer advisor. Indeed, German philo-Semitism,⁵ in the form of uncritical support of Israel, would go on to function as a moral alibi to undermine any challenges directed at structures and outlooks rooted in the Nazi era.⁶ The complex relationship between latent anti-Semitism, attempts at deflecting German guilt, and philo-Semitic pro-Zionism first became evident during the parliamentary debate on the Luxembourg Agreement. Adenauer was only able to overcome resistance to the treaty's ratification within his own ranks by relying on the support of the Social Democrats (SPD). More tellingly, he would justify his stance by invoking the need not to upset U.S. policy on Germany that was shaped by Jewish influence.⁷ Untainted by the Nazi epoch and formally allied to Israel's then-ruling Labor Zionist bloc, the SPD evolved into the main proponent of diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv at a time when Germany's trade union confederation, the *Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, also maintained extensive relations with Israel's *Histadrut*.⁸

West German attitudes toward the conflict in the dawning days of the Federal Republic were thus shaped by a double paradox: on the one hand, extensive covert support for Israel coupled with the absence of formal relations; on the other, an SDP-dominated and oppositional Left that elevated diplomatic relations with Israel to a symbol in the struggle against German historical amnesia, versus a ruling conservative Right that vacillated between latent anti-Semitism and zealous, albeit discreet, philo-Semitism. Cold War anti-Communism was the glue that held together the paradoxical stances, which assured Israel of every kind of West German support short of full diplomatic relations that were only established in 1965. The Palestinians remained invisible during that era while the Arab states were seen, at best, as important trading partners, and at worst, as unreliable friends susceptible to Soviet influence.

Unlike West Germany, East Germany did not regard itself as a legal heir to the German Reich, and its stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict followed the twists and turns of Soviet foreign policy. In the late 1940s, the ruling Socialist Unity Party registered its sympathies for the Zionist militias,⁹

but as the Cold War amplified, the GDR followed the Soviet Union in its pro-Arab tilt. Indeed, intent on acquiring international legitimacy in that period, the GDR was especially solicitous of Arab recognition, playing on the Arab world's generally distrustful attitude toward West Germany and what was perceived as West German ambiguity.¹⁰ Subsequent diplomatic and military support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) served to increase East German prestige in the Arab world. It should be noted here that the GDR—like its Soviet ally—conditioned its support of the PLO on the organization's implicit acceptance of a two-state solution after it had issued its ten-point program in 1974 that called for the establishment of a “national authority” on every portion of liberated Palestinian territory.¹¹

The Europeanization of Germany's Middle East Policy

The paradox of the all-but-official West German ties to Israel became untenable by the mid-1960s. It was in response to the visit by East Germany's head of state, Walter Ulbricht, to Cairo in 1965 that the Federal Republic formally established diplomatic relations with Israel, something that in turn led Arab states to breaking off their ties with Bonn. The development had been preceded by press leaks on West German arms shipments to Israel. The establishment of official diplomatic relations led to a significant shift in public perceptions of the conflict in Germany—a shift that would become more pronounced after the Arab defeat in 1967 and the subsequent emergence of the PLO as a force to be reckoned with.¹² German-Israeli ties not only surfaced from secrecy, but the Springer tabloid press even likened Moshe Dayan to Field Marshal Erwin Rommel.

The German Right's open moral support of Israel was concomitant with the Left's declining sympathies. Not only had the establishment of formal relations robbed the left-wing case for Israel of its *raison d'être*, largely as a consequence of the movement against the Vietnam War, the emerging New Left in Germany began to identify with the Palestinian cause and the more left-leaning PLO factions. The foundations of this shift toward an anticolonial stance had already been laid in the late 1950s, when significant segments of the SPD embraced the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale struggle and denounced the German conservative Right's support of French colonialism in Algeria.¹³

However, despite uninterrupted, close economic and defense ties, official West German relations with Israel were complicated by several factors. Following the political impasse reached in the wake of Germany's momentous 1968 student contestation, the SPD-Liberal coalition under Brandt came to power in 1969, bringing into play a series of interrelated dynamics. First and foremost, the public perception of Israel as a vulnerable state had been shattered by the June 1967 war, and Israel was now viewed alternatively as a valiant military power worthy of admiration (the Right) or an aggressive expansionist state (the Left).

In contrast to the Christian Democrats, whose claims to an antifascist lineage lacked credibility, the Social Democrats were more confident in articulating robust positions on the Middle East that diverged from the Israeli narrative. Second, the government's newly deployed Ostpolitik to ease Cold War tensions stood in marked contrast to Israel's lobbying for an aggressive Western stance

against the Soviet Union in conjunction with the question of Soviet Jewish emigration. And third, and perhaps more significantly, the 1973 oil embargo highlighted the need for a European understanding with the Arab world, resulting in a process of dialogue in which direct contacts were initiated between the Federal Republic and the PLO.¹⁴ Thus, through the 1970s, West Germany gradually embedded its Middle East policy in a European framework, the culmination of which was the 1980 Venice Declaration¹⁵ calling for Palestinian self-determination; simultaneously, Germany functioned as a foil to the decidedly more robust pro-Arab inclinations of France. This new orientation reflected European efforts to gain a political foothold in the region at the expense of the then-two superpowers, which were given expression in lucrative arms deals with Arab states.

As the above-described, externally driven dynamics led to a more evenhanded German attitude toward the Palestine question in the 1970s, domestic factors in the 1980s would lay the groundwork for the subsequent evolution of German-Israeli relations down to the present day. Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon was decisive in this respect: as the first Arab-Israeli conflagration covered by Western journalists on both sides of the battle lines; and thanks to television, the conflict gained unprecedented visibility and brought to a head the question of the permissibility of German criticism of Israel in public discourse. At the official level, this was reflected by Bonn's conspicuous silence in the face of worldwide condemnation of Israeli actions in Beirut, particularly the prolonged siege of the city and the subsequent massacres at Palestinian refugee camps under the purview, if not at the hands of, the Israeli army. An earlier spat between Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and Menachem Begin, in which the latter alluded to the former's past as a soldier in World War II,¹⁶ had already highlighted the sensitive nature of Germany's emphasis on the legitimacy of Palestinian rights in its efforts to curry favor with the Arab world.

The election of a Conservative-Liberal coalition under Helmut Kohl further entrenched this psychological dimension of German policy on Palestine. The Kohl government embarked on a neoconservative project to rehabilitate German nationalism and liberate foreign policy from its historical constraints, mostly notably the legacy of Nazism. The German chancellor famously spelled out this new direction in 1984 during a controversial speech before the Knesset in which he spoke of the *Gnade der späten Geburt* ("grace of late birth"¹⁷), an allusion to the advent of a new and younger political class in Germany that could no longer be regarded as tainted by the Nazi past.

Kohl's more dynamic German foreign policy only intensified in subsequent years. Especially after Germany recovered full sovereignty in foreign affairs as a result of German reunification in 1990, Israel looked on the expanded and more independent Germany with some anxiety.¹⁸ Combined with Kohl's assertive rhetoric, revelations about the involvement of West German firms in developing Iraq's chemical weapons were particularly unnerving for the Israelis. Heightened Israeli sensibilities combined with an Iraqi missile launch directed at Israel during the Iraq War paved the way, in the spirit of check-book diplomacy, for the first German delivery of nuclear-capable submarines to Israel.¹⁹ Far from proving ominous, Germany's quasi-revisionist discourses in fact helped to reinforce its commitment to Israel. Relations thus fully resumed the moral quid pro quo character of the Adenauer era after something of a deviation in the 1970s. Only this time, the goal consisted of cementing the image of a new, enlarged, and strong Germany that was light-years removed from its Nazi past.

Current Relations with Israel and the Palestinian Authority

On the issue of Palestine, Germany has substantial sway as a result of its leading role within EU bodies, where it has often acted as Israel's foremost lobbyist. Favoring close coordination with the United States, Bonn has often blocked the emergence of an independent European position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, to the delight of Israeli policy makers. Thus, for example, it vociferously opposed the 2009 Swedish proposal for unilaterally recognizing East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state²⁰ and undermined every attempt at a common European stance on Palestine's UN membership bid in 2011–12, repeatedly declaring its opposition to the endeavor.²¹

At the time of writing, German arms shipments to Israel continue unabated with the delivery of Dolphin-class submarines, believed to be fitted with nuclear warheads in Israel.²² Overall, the program has proven beneficial to the German shipbuilding industry, with Israel offsetting the costs with revenues earned from German purchases of Israeli high-tech equipment, such as drones and other so-called security technology. In the last decade, Germany has been one of the largest importers of such Israeli equipment, second only to the United States.²³ While German military exports to Israel, other than submarines, appear nominally marginal as compared to exports to other countries, according to the government's semiannual arms export report,²⁴ Israel's military makes extensive use of "dual-use" technology from Germany, like tank engines, navigation aids, infrared sensors, and other vital electronic components during their periodic assaults on the Gaza Strip.²⁵ Arms manufacturers from both countries are currently engaged in the joint development of new weapons systems,²⁶ and German troops were trained in "urban warfare" in Israel in October 2015, during the largest joint exercise held by the two states to date.²⁷

Relations at the civil society level are equally strong. The German-Israeli parliamentary friendship group is the Bundestag's second largest,²⁸ while German trade unions, as well as church and cultural associations, maintain extensive links with their Israeli counterparts. In an interesting development, some thirty thousand Israelis—mostly young, middle-class Ashkenazi professionals—have made Berlin their home in recent years. At the same time, Germany is nominally in favor of the creation of an independent Palestinian state. To help ease the contradictions between its commitment to Israel and its economic interests in the Arab world,²⁹ it has played a major role in financing Palestinian institution building since the signing of the Oslo Accords.³⁰ German NGOs were especially active during the Oslo era, facilitating contacts between Palestinian and Israeli civil society actors, helping establish what has come to be labeled the "peace industry."³¹ Foundations affiliated with different parties in the Bundestag retain offices in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Ramallah; and exercise a considerable amount of soft power. After the Second Intifada, the Federal Republic threw its weight behind the Salam Fayyad strategy of neoliberal state building, providing aid to Palestinian police forces and participating in various infrastructure projects in the West Bank.³²

Like other European governments, however, the German government has grown weary of Israel's intransigence and ongoing settlement construction, something evident in Chancellor Angela Merkel's frustration with what she regards as her Israeli counterpart's unilateralism. The ongoing stalemate in the so-called peace process has sparked a critical mass of debates within the German foreign policy establishment. Thus, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, one of Germany's leading foreign policy think tanks, has already produced reports proclaiming the

death of the two-state solution and signaling the advent of a “one-state reality.”³³ Ideally, Merkel would much prefer an Israeli government verbally committed to the two-state solution and a Palestinian leadership that refrains from taking what are deemed to be unilateral steps in the international arena (such as acceding to the Rome Treaty and other UN instruments).

Given the interdependence between Germany and Israel on a structural level, it is highly unlikely that German frustration will translate into effective pressure on Tel Aviv. Germany has also never questioned the United States' role as the sole broker in diplomatic negotiations, preferring to focus on other aspects of the conflict instead. However, Berlin's evasive stance might soon become untenable given the isolationist tendencies of the current U.S. administration and the affinity of President Trump's key Middle East advisors with the settler bloc in Israel's ruling coalition. Whether persisting tensions between Trump and Merkel give way to a more pronounced EU role in the peace process, *independent* of the United States, and under Germany's leadership, remains to be seen.

Civil Society Perceptions of Palestine and Israel

The notion of a “special relationship” with Israel has been met in recent years with near-universal approval among Germany's political class. Chancellor Merkel's strong interest in Israel has been attributed by some to her East German upbringing and a perceived need to distance herself from the former GDR's support for the PLO. Among the SPD, on the other hand, talk of the need for evenhandedness,³⁴ which was especially loud during the years of Germany's political opening to the Arab world, is today but a distant memory. The Green Party made occasional pro-Palestinian utterances during the long process of “institutionalization” it underwent in the 1980s, but it has since adopted a left-Zionist “peace” perspective, essentially supporting Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state” while paying lip service to the idea of a two-state solution.³⁵ Even the relatively new Left Party (Die Linke), founded in 2007 by the merger of the successor to the GDR's former ruling party with an SPD splinter group and segments of the radical Left, has in effect endorsed the consensus on Israel: in 2011, it enforced a ban of any discussion of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement or talk of a one-state solution within its parliamentary caucus.³⁶ Finally, the country's emerging right-wing populists, the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, or AfD), has—in the spirit of the U.S. alt-right—adopted a categorically pro-Israel stance to deflect well-founded suspicions of racism, including anti-Semitism, in its midst. This would conform to the wider paradigm shift across Europe's far Right, which embraces a pro-Zionist perspective on the Palestine issue on the basis of racist, anti-Muslim sentiments.³⁷ Even if serious concerns about Israeli settlement expansion and human rights violations are occasionally raised in the Bundestag, mostly by the Left Party and the Greens, any meaningful practical censure is rendered irrelevant by mantra-like references to a two-state solution.

So, what explains the evolution of Germany's commitment to Israel into what has become a hegemonic discourse in recent years? Part of the explanation lies in the growing importance of Holocaust remembrance practices and their mediatization in popular culture, a process that originated in the United States.³⁸ Since the late 1960s, U.S. Zionist organizations have been engaged in an all-out effort to deflect criticism of Israel's human rights transgressions and international law

violations, placing the increasingly complex Zionist-Palestinian dispute in the (morally indisputable) context of Holocaust causality.³⁹

In Germany, the growing awareness of Judeocide did not initially bear on attitudes toward Israel, but was confined to the public debate following the airing of the 1978 televised series *Holocaust* and the ensuing Historikerstreit (historians' quarrel) in the mid-1980s. On one side of the controversy stood historian Ernst Nolte, who interpreted the Holocaust as a preemptive measure against the perceived threat of similar "Asiatic" Soviet atrocities. On the other was philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who insisted on the singularity of Nazi crimes and defended a non-nationalist "constitutional patriotism." In the prevailing neoconservative political context under Kohl, Nolte's revisionism was rightly interpreted by Habermas and others as an attempt to whitewash German nationalism in an effort to legitimize a new active realpolitik, anchored in Germany's historical role as the leading Central European power.

The plethora of interventions that followed in the form of newspaper op-eds was a milestone signaling the end of what hitherto had been the deflection of responsibility for the Holocaust to just the "inner core" of the Nazi party. Extensive knowledge and theory centered on the Nazi past, previously confined to intellectual circles, were thus socialized in what was considered a generally apolitical society. The limitations of any revisionist historical project had become evident in Germany, thus resolving the controversy in favor of the standpoint taken by Habermas and others.

However, Habermas' argument that *any* contextualization of the Holocaust was impossible inadvertently reproduced aspects of the Holocaust's representation in popular U.S. culture—namely, the complete divorce of the Judeocide from the dynamics of capitalist crisis and imperialism and the identification of Zionism as the natural response to anti-Semitism. This enabled political elites to elevate the Holocaust into a national discourse after reunification,⁴⁰ and in the process undermined the philosopher's initial call for a denationalized civic identity. Instead, in a reunified Germany attempting to forge a positive national identity, uncritical support for a supposedly threatened Israel—hitherto associated with the consequences of defeat and guilt for the Nazi past—was to be gradually transformed into an element of German pride, of a reinvigorated German "imagined community."⁴¹

The pro-Israel shift can also be partially explained by the growing importance of humanitarian discourses in legitimizing foreign policy objectives, a development also dating back to the 1980s.⁴² Humanitarian arguments facilitating German military interventions overseas have been critical to undermining widespread pacifist sentiment in Germany. Unlike Christian Democrats, whose attempts at normalizing German foreign policy tended to arouse suspicions of historical revisionism and revanchism, "Third Way" Social Democrats, along with the pacifist-cum-interventionist Greens, proved far more effective at reinterpreting the moral lessons of twentieth-century German history—hence the rationale provided by the SPD-Green coalition for joining the war against Serbia in 1999, which justified Germany's first combat mission abroad since 1945 by alluding to the need to "prevent another Auschwitz."⁴³

In the same vein, emphasizing responsibility for Israel's security is increasingly framed in terms of the need to provide Jewish Israelis with a "safe haven" in a hostile region dominated by quasi-fascist Islamic fundamentalists—another rationale that, as in the case of "humanitarian intervention," remains beyond the ambit of international law. Chancellor Merkel's 2008 speech

before the Knesset,⁴⁴ where she declared Israel's security to be an integral part of the German *raison d'état*, must be seen as evidence of this. Similarly, the German ministry of foreign affairs,⁴⁵ as well as the Bundeswehr's 2016 strategy proposals,⁴⁶ reference "special responsibility" for safeguarding "Israel's security" and "right to exist" as strategic priorities of German foreign and security policy. Far from signaling any ground-breaking change of course in German policy in the Middle East, the entrenchment of a pro-Israel consensus in public discourse has served as the ultimate moral underpinning of an increasingly assertive German foreign policy.

Anti-Semitism and Criticism of Israel: Recent Findings

Complementing the official discourse on "shared values" and historical responsibility that frames German-Israeli relations, support for Israel is justified at the societal level by the need to prevent the resurgence of anti-Semitism. This has happened in tandem with a major European endeavor in recent years to redefine what constitutes anti-Semitism, exemplified by the now-discredited criteria used by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. Thus, in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the designation of Israel as a racist state was considered anti-Semitic,⁴⁷ while more recent charges of a "new anti-Semitism" are directed today at Muslims and the radical Left for the criticism of Israel that is prevalent among these two groups.⁴⁸

However much they proliferate in public discourse, such notions need to be carefully scrutinized against the findings of several empirical studies. In Germany, as in many other Western societies, anti-Semitism has been on the decline since 1945, and where it exists, it is more prevalent among older generations who were socialized during the Nazi era. According to Ministry of Interior figures published following a parliamentary inquiry, in 2017 there were 522 anti-Semitic criminal acts, 479 of which were motivated by neofascism.⁴⁹ More significantly, perhaps, an extensive study by the University of Konstanz in 2012⁵⁰ provides interesting data on the relationship between anti-Semitism and criticism of Israeli policies. The study found that a large majority of Germans, some 69.4 percent, have a moderate to vocal pro-Palestinian stance on the conflict. This segment is made up of two subgroups: a smaller 25.7 percent portion of "anti-Semitic critics of Israel," and the remaining, and larger portion of 43.7 percent who overwhelmingly reject anti-Semitic prejudices.

The characteristics of these two subgroups are of particular interest. Spurred by pacifist and human rights considerations, critics of Israel tend to be better informed and more emotionally engaged with the conflict. Their criticism of Israeli policies tends to grow in proportion to their knowledge about the conflict. Anti-Semitic critics of Israel, on the other hand, are usually less emotionally engaged with the subject, and the radicalness of their views tends to increase proportionally to their lack of knowledge about the conflict. They not only harbor anti-Semitic sentiments, but also anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim ones. Politically, the non-anti-Semitic group tends to be located within the left-wing and Green segments of the spectrum, whereas the anti-Semitic group is more prevalent both among the extreme Right and within the political mainstream.⁵¹ Other studies—such as the 2015 research published by the influential Bertelsmann Foundation regarding German and Israeli attitudes on bilateral relations, the conflict, and German history, among others—have registered a decrease of identification with Israel among younger Germans.⁵²

Palestine and Anti-Muslim Racism in the German Context

Since public opinion trends reflect widespread criticism of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians, one might assume that such sentiments would have found political expression and challenged official German policy on the conflict by now. The explanation for the persistence of the discrepancy, however, must take another important factor into consideration, namely anti-Muslim racism. Fear and distrust of Muslims, as opposed to more generalized xenophobia, have been features of German society at least since the beginning of the so-called war on terror,⁵³ and its main proponents have been right-wing populists. Rising social polarization in recent years has resulted in the emergence of far-right protest movements like Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West (PEGIDA) and parties like the AfD. While PEGIDA's strongholds lie in federal states with a negligible percentage of Muslims, the fact that the socioeconomic grievances of a squeezed middle class⁵⁴ are being coded into anti-Muslim sentiment is indicative of the pervasiveness of anti-Muslim racism as a socially acceptable form of racism.

PEGIDA and AfD perceive themselves as antiestablishment forces, but their racism against Muslims is by no means a fringe phenomenon. As demonstrated by Alain Badiou, Eric Hazan, and Ivan Segré, in the case of France, anti-Muslim racism has become a convenient way of projecting blame onto the Muslim Other for complex social issues that might blemish the mainstream's self-image.⁵⁵ Alongside sexism and homophobia, anti-Semitism, which is almost always equated with anti-Zionism, is one such social issue. Anti-Muslim racism in the public debate on Palestine and Israel is evident in the conflation of Islam and political Islamism with Hamas and other Islamist organizations, as well as the construction of a purportedly historical lineage between the Third Reich, on the one hand, and the ideology of political Islam, on the other.⁵⁶ In a situation where parts of PEGIDA and the AfD have adopted a pro-Zionist discourse, it is quite telling that allegations of anti-Semitism leveled against sections of the Left critical of Israel do not so much consist of the charge of German historical revisionism, but rather of relativizing "Islamist anti-Semitism."

The contours of the links between an uncritical support of Israel and anti-Muslim racism have been deftly identified by dissident Israeli author and poet Yitzhak Laor in his overview of the subject in three European countries: France, Germany, and Italy.⁵⁷ According to Laor, an Israel-centered culture of Holocaust memorialization has served as the lynchpin to the construction of post-1990 European identities with exclusionary ramifications for Europe's Muslim minorities. Laor's conclusion is supported by a plethora of circumstantial evidence in the case of Germany. Thus, a proposed citizenship test in the state of Hessen in 2006 asked the applicants to "explain Israel's right to exist."⁵⁸ In a development related to the ongoing so-called refugee crisis, the head of the Jewish Board of Deputies in Germany, Josef Schuster, echoed the Zionist explanation for Arab opposition to Israel by basing his demands for limits on immigration on the "intolerance" and "hatred of Jews"⁵⁹ supposedly inherent in the refugees' cultures of origin.

The interplay between the construction of national discourses around Israel and anti-Muslim racism became evident during demonstrations against the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2008–9, and more recently in 2014. German protests against the two attacks consisted

largely of spontaneous demonstrations by Arab and Turkish communities, during which a minority of Muslim youths became susceptible to the “anti-Zionism of fools”⁶⁰ by uttering anti-Semitic slogans. However, this provoked a concerted overreaction by a political class and mainstream media proclaiming the shocking return of the 1930s and silencing the fact that, like racist attacks on Muslims and refugees, the overwhelming majority of anti-Semitic acts are perpetrated by white ethnic Germans. Meanwhile, the German government restricted itself to criticizing the “disproportionate” character of Israel’s aerial attacks, even as these resulted in the killing of a Palestinian family holding German citizenship.⁶¹ Notwithstanding the fact that large segments of public opinion are critical of Israel and do not harbor anti-Muslim sentiments, the specter of “Islamic fundamentalism” in the form of Hamas and alleged Holocaust revisionism in the Arab world (and Iran) loom large in the construction of a false symmetry in the conflict, effectively preventing pro-Palestinian mobilization from breaking out of the confines of a mostly migrant social milieu.

Challenges to the German Pro-Israel Consensus

Despite this situation, the potential for a change of attitudes is not entirely unimaginable. German society’s greater understanding of the Zionist point of view has rested on three key historical elements: first and foremost, a strong emotional factor resulting from the perception of Israel as a state created for survivors of the Nazi Holocaust; second, akin to the situation in the United States, the idea of Israel as a liberal regime with democratic norms and guaranteed social rights; and lastly, the diffuse pacifist sentiment of German society must also be considered. The basic outline of the two-state discourse in the West always rested on the idea of two equally powerful sides, as well as the understanding of the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a transitory condition. As long as Israel remained rhetorically committed to the idea of the two-state solution, any unilateral Palestinian move challenging the asymmetry of power in the conflict could be cast as an affront to “peace” in the German context, thereby absolving the Israeli state of its culpability in violating international law.

All three elements have undergone a slow but continuous shift in recent years thanks to none other than the Israeli government, whose current policies render farcical any talk of a future contiguous and fully sovereign Palestinian state. The growth of the extreme Right in Israel, coupled with the enactment of discriminatory legislation, further undermines the country’s image as a liberal democracy, as do policies that are not directly related to the Palestinians, such as the treatment of African asylum seekers. Lastly, there is a growing visibility in Germany of Jewish voices from beyond the Zionist mainstream. Ironically, the historically legitimized symbiosis between German and Israeli civil societies has transformed Berlin into a locus of Israeli Jewish dissent,⁶² leading to a certain differentiation within the German discourse on the conflict. For instance, protests against the 2014 assault on Gaza were not only marked by controversy, but also by the formation for the first time of tripartite coalitions between Palestinian and Muslim communities, parts of the German Left, and Jewish activists—many of whom were Israeli expatriates constituting a vocal pro-Palestinian minority within their community.⁶³ While the

BDS movement is not quite as visible in Germany as in the United Kingdom,⁶⁴ it remains active in the gradual opening up of the debate there, as evidenced by a recent series of legal victories by the Palestinian solidarity movement on the local level.⁶⁵

However, Germany remains a particularly rough terrain for Palestine solidarity activists. The current pro-Israel consensus, and especially the dominant discourse equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, complicates the process of raising awareness about Israeli violations of Palestinian rights. Just as significantly, it also targets those communities that are inclined to express solidarity with Palestinian suffering. Germany is part of a continent-wide trend, in which support for Israel, often framed in the context of so-called Judeo-Christian values, is used to advance the construction of a European identity that excludes Muslims by definition. This trend is currently undergoing a process of radicalization, owing to the dramatic rise of a far Right, which manages to be both pro-Zionist and latently anti-Semitic, as is the case in the United States with what is known as the alt-right movement. The question of Palestine thus assumes the additional quality of a symbolic issue, where the parameters of German citizenship are contested whenever there is a flare-up of hostilities in the region.

Notwithstanding this state of affairs, Germany's pro-Israel consensus by no means remains unchallenged. If, as expected, current trends persist, Berlin's foreign policy will be confronted by a one-state reality. This could potentially accelerate the transformation of perceptions of the Palestine question from a territorial dispute centered on land to a normative issue revolving around the concept of equality and rights. Regardless of their limitations, opinion trends already point to the existence of a critical mass of human-rights-based support for Palestinian aspirations among Germans. Generational factors, such as low levels of identification with Israel among so-called millennials, who are associated with socially liberal attitudes, may also have a growing impact with time. This is already true of the U.S. and British contexts, as reflected in Senator Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign and the rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the British Labour party.⁶⁶

Whether these developments help steer Germany's Middle East policy away from its current role as an enabler of Israeli unilateralism in the long run will largely depend on a couple of other, more tenuous variables: first, the formation of an inclusive grassroots coalition that counters the resurgent far Right—in both its anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic manifestations—in which solidarity with Palestine must figure prominently by definition; and second, the advent of a Palestinian leadership capable of seizing on the opportunities provided by the current conjuncture for including Palestine in the context of wider social struggles (see “Enshrining Discrimination: Israel's Nation-State Law” by Nadia Ben-Youssef and Sandra Samaan Tamari in *JPS* 48 [1]). This would entail organic linkages with the global solidarity movement, reminiscent of those between the African National Congress and the global anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s, while at the same time being democratically accountable to Palestinian civil society and aligned with the latter's demands.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

- 1 For a detailed description of the phrase's multiple meanings, see Joseph Levine, "On Questioning the Jewish State," *New York Times*, 9 March 2013, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/09/on-questioning-the-jewish-state/?mtrref=www.google.com&assetType=opinion>.
- 2 Nicholas Balabkins, *West German Reparations to Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971); Kenneth Lewan, "How West Germany Helped to Build Israel," *JPS* 4, no. 4 (1975): pp. 41–64.
- 3 Shlomo Shpiro, "Friends in the Dark: The First Decade of German-Israeli Intelligence Cooperation," in *Die deutsch-israelischen Sicherheitsbeziehungen: Vergangenheit, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, ed. Milena Uhlmann (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 2008), pp. 76–89.
- 4 The term refers to the 1950s–60s strategy developed in West German ruling circles to acquire nuclear weapons by seeking closer political ties with France.
- 5 On the interplay between anti- and philo-Semitism, see Moshe Zuckermann, *Zweierlei Holocaust: Der Holocaust in den Politischen kulturen Israels und Deutschlands* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2004).
- 6 Thomas Scheffler, "Die Normalisierung der Doppelmoral: Vierzig Jahre deutsch-israelische Beziehungen," *PROKLA* 18, no. 73 (1988): pp.76–96, <https://doi.org/10.32387/prokla.v18i73.1274>.
- 7 Explaining his support for the Luxembourg Agreement in a television interview on 29 December 1965, Adenauer states: "*Die Macht der Juden . . . besonders in Amerika, sollte man nicht unterschätzen.*" (The power of the Jews . . . especially in America, should not be underestimated.) See "Günter Gaus im Gespräch mit Konrad Adenauer (1965) [ENG SUB]," YouTube video, 32:36 posted by Leonard Dietrich, 10 September 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90EVIH4KZsc>.
- 8 Thomas Scheffler, *Die SPD und der Algerienkrieg (1954–1962)* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1995), p. 33.
- 9 The coverage of the 1948 war by the ruling Socialist Unity Party newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, reflected the then-pro-Zionist sympathies of East Germany's Communists. For related reports, see the paper's online archive: <https://www.nd-archiv.de/>. The explanation for this stance cannot be reduced to German guilt, something confirmed by the overtly pro-Zionist posture of other European Communist parties at the time, including the Communist Party of Great Britain. For more on this topic, see Paul Kelemen, *The British Left and Zionism: History of a Divorce* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 104–5.
- 10 For a detailed overview of GDR-Israeli relations based on diplomatic archives, see Angelika Timm, *Hammer, Zirkel, Davidstern: Das gestörte Verhältnis der DDR zu Zionismus und Staat Israel* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997).
- 11 This is an important point to emphasize as some recent scholarship has sought to portray the GDR's attitude toward Israel as deriving from latent anti-Semitism. See, for example, Jeffrey Herf, *Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967–1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 12 The shift was grasped by activist (and subsequent Red Army Faction founder) Ulrike Meinhof in her foreword, titled "Drei Freunde Israels," to Isaac Deutscher's treatise on the June 1967 war, *Der israelisch-arabische Konflikt* (Frankfurt: Voltaire, 1968), p. 3.
- 13 Claudia Olejniczak, "Dritte-Welt-Bewegung," in *Die sozialen Bewegungen in Deutschland seit 1945: Ein Handbuch*, ed. Dieter Rucht and Roland Roth (Frankfurt: Campus, 2008), pp. 319–46.
- 14 See, for example, Ahmad Sidqi al-Dajani, "The PLO and the Euro-Arab Dialogue," *JPS* 9, no. 3 (1980): pp. 81–98, <http://jps.ucpress.edu/content/9/3/81>, for a detailed account of the establishment of relations between the PLO and individual countries of the EU (then known as the European Economic Community).
- 15 "Venice European Council Declaration," European Union External Action Service (EEAS) Archives, EEAS, 13 June 1980, https://eeas.europa.eu/mepp/docs/venice_declaration_1980_en.pdf.
- 16 The verbal spat erupted after Schmidt declared his support for Palestinian self-determination during a visit to Saudi Arabia in May 1981. Begin subsequently alluded to Schmidt's past membership of the

- Wehrmacht. The incident, which provoked numerous public debates in Germany, remains the most serious crisis in German-Israeli relations to date.
- 17 See Craig R. Whitney, "The World; The War Still Unsettles the Winners of the Peace," 8 May 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/08/weekinreview/the-world-the-war-still-unsettles-the-winners-of-the-peace.html>.
 - 18 The Federal Republic only gained full purview over foreign affairs from the Western allies after the 1990 signing of the so-called Two Plus Four Treaty sealing German reunification.
 - 19 Due to these revelations, the construction of the first two submarines was subsidized by the German government while both countries shared the costs of subsequent units. The Schröder government approved the sale of three more submarines shortly before the end of its term in 2005. In October 2017, Germany announced it would partly finance the construction of three more units for Israel by 2027. See "Geschäfte mit der Massenvernichtung – U-Boote für Israel," IPPNW Press Release no. 10.9.2014, 10 September 2014, <https://www.ippnw.de/presse/artikel/de/geschaefte-mit-der-massenvernichtung.html>; "Deutschland beteiligt sich finanziell an U-Booten für Israel," Spiegel Online, 23 October 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/israel-deutschland-beteiligt-sich-finanziell-an-drei-u-booten-a-1174239.html>.
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 - 23 Ephraim Lapid, "Highlights in the Development of Security Relations between Israel and Germany," in *Die deutsch-israelischen Sicherheitsbeziehungen: Vergangenheit, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, ed. Milena Uhlmann (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 2008), pp. 68–75.
 - 24 Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWi), *Bericht der Bundesregierung über ihre Exportpolitik für konventionelle Rüstungsgüter im ersten Halbjahr 2016* (Berlin: BMWi, 2016), p. 26, https://www.bmw.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Aussenwirtschaft/ruestungsexport-zwischenbericht-2016.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=12.
 - 25 Otfried Nassauer, "Der unsichtbare Dritte," *Die Tageszeitung*, 16 January 2009, <http://www.taz.de/!5169529/>.
 - 26 "Umstrittener 'Meeresgott,'" *AzVision*, 12 January 2016, <https://de.azvision.az/news/5863/umstrittener-meeresgott.html>.
 - 27 Gili Cohen, "Israeli, German Armies Hold Joint Training Exercise in Israel to Practice Urban Warfare," *Haaretz*, 28 October 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-germany-hold-joint-exercises-1.5414208>.
 - 28 For more on Germany's parliamentary friendship groups, see the International page of Deutscher Bundestag's website, https://www.bundestag.de/en/europe/international/int_bez/allgemein/245920.
 - 29 Hermann Gröhe et al., "Evenhanded, Not Neutral: Points of Reference for a German Middle East Policy," in *Germany and the Middle East: Interests and Options*, ed. Volker Perthes (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2002), pp. 11–28.
 - 30 Since Oslo, German aid in the West Bank has focused on the development of water reserves, something that has proved mostly ineffectual due to the Israeli military authorities' prohibition of well drilling. As a result, the German development aid agency has redirected its resources to scaled-down goals, such as installing water tanks. See: Die Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit Water Programme, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/18092.html>; and, Clemens Messerschmid, "Separating the Waters (Part 2)," *Electronic Intifada*, 1 June 2007, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/separating-waters-part-2/6970>.

- 31 See, for example, Toufic Haddad, *Palestine Ltd.: Neoliberalism and Nationalism in the Occupied Territory* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016).
- 32 Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, "Palästinensische Gebiete: Situation und Zusammenarbeit," https://www.bmz.de/de/laender_regionen/naher_osten_nordafrika/palaestinensische_gebiete/zusammenarbeit/index.html; "Assistance for Palestine," Federal Foreign Office, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/nahermittlererosten/01-konfliktnahest/israelpalaestinkonflikt-node/zukunftpalaestina>.
- 33 Muriel Asseburg and Jan Busse, *Das Ende der Zweistaatenregelung?* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2016), https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2016A27_ass_Busse.pdf.
- 34 Notably, it is former SPD chancellor Helmut Schmidt who has been most critical of Germany's commitments to Israel's security. See Giovanni di Lorenzo, "Fragen an den Altkanzler: Verstehen Sie das, Herr Schmidt?," *Zeit Online*, 12 November 2009, <https://www.zeit.de/2009/47/Helmut-Schmidt-47>.
- 35 Ludger Volmer, *Die Grünen und die Außenpolitik: Ein schwieriges Verhältnis* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1998), p. 457.
- 36 The decree was the culmination of an intensely publicized debate within Die Linke with accusations of "Left anti-Semitism" by other parties and segments of the media. See Leandros Fischer, "The German Left's Palestine Problem," *Jacobin*, 3 December 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/the-germans-lefts-palestine-problem/>.
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- 39 Novick, *Nach dem Holocaust*, p. 220.
- 40 Gabriel Piterberg, "Euro-Zionism and its Discontents," *New Left Review* 84 (November–December 2013): pp. 43–65.
- 41 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).
- 42 Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2012). Weizman locates the emergence of the "humanitarian-interventionist" consensus in the ideological evolution of disillusioned leftists during the 1980s, most notably in France. Other works point to a correlation between this development and partisanship for Israel as a bastion of Western democracy against authoritarian "third worldism." See Richard Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 170–72.
- 43 Marcus Hawel, *Die normalisierte Nation: Zum Verhältnis von Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Außenpolitik* (Hannover: Offizin, 2006), pp. 222–29.
- 44 A transcription of the speech is available on the Bundesregierung's website. See: "Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Dr. Angela Merkel vor der Knesset am 18. März 2008 in Jerusalem," Die Bundesregierung, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/bulletin/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-dr-angela-merkel-796170>.
- 45 "Beziehungen zu Deutschland," Israel page of the Auswärtiges Amt [German Ministry of Foreign Affairs] website, October 2018, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/israel-node/-/203806#content_0.
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- 47 David Cronin, *Europe's Alliance with Israel: Aiding the Occupation* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), pp. 147–48.
- 48 See, for example, Doron Rabinovici, Ulrich Speck, and Natan Sznaider, eds., *Neuer Antisemitismus?: Eine globale Debatte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004) for a collection of essays on how criticism of Israeli policies from leftist and Islamist quarters has come to be portrayed as a “new anti-Semitism.” Despite the discrediting of the EU Military Committee’s definition of anti-Semitism, components of it have resurfaced in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s “working definition,” which has been used in the campaign against the Labour Party leadership of Jeremy Corbyn in Great Britain. See Dan Sabbagh, “Labour Adopts IHRA Antisemitism Definition in Full,” *The Guardian*, 4 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/04/labour-adopts-ihra-antisemitism-definition-in-full>; and Moshé Machover, “An Immoral Dilemma: The Trap of Zionist Propaganda,” *JPS* 47, no. 4 (Summer 2018): pp. 69–78.
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- 51 Kempf, “Antisemitismus und Israelkritik,” pp. 7–11.
- 52 Steffen Hagemann and Roby Nathanson, *Deutschland und Israel heute: Verbindende Vergangenheit, trennende Gegenwart?* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Foundation, 2015), pp. 42–73, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/Studie_LW_Deutschland_und_Israel_heute_2015.pdf.
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- 55 Alain Badiou, Eric Hazan, and Ivan Segré, *Reflections on Anti-Semitism* (London: Verso, 2013), loc. 569, Kindle.
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- 57 Yitzhak Laor, *The Myths of Liberal Zionism* (London: Verso, 2010).
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