

German-Israeli relations in crisis

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A visit to Israel by the German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) ended Tuesday with a diplomatic scandal. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu canceled a planned meeting with Gabriel after the latter had insisted on speaking with representatives of the organisations “Breaking the Silence” and “B’Tselem”, which are critical of Israel’s settlement and occupation policy.

With a few exceptions Gabriel’s conduct found broad support in the German media and from political parties. The CDU foreign policy expert, Roderich Kiesewetter, praised the foreign minister for “acting entirely correctly by keeping to his program”. Norbert Röttgen (CDU), chairman of the Bundestag’s foreign affairs committee, underlined the importance of “talks embracing the entire range of politics and society”.

Under the headline “Gabriel has set the right tone in Israel”, *Die Welt* commented that criticism is needed “because Israel’s right-wing government is preparing to give up the two-state solution without saying what should take its place.” The paper continued: “There are good reasons for representatives of Western democracies “to be concerned about Israel’s domestic policy development”.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* called the Israeli Prime Minister “Vladimir Tayyip Netanyahu” and accused him of: “Shaking up his country, undermining old values, endangering democracy just like Putin in Russia and Erdogan in Turkey”. Netanyahu’s refusal to meet with Gabriel was “a sensation, a scandal, a low point in German-Israeli relations”. The paper then praised Gabriel for not “backing down” and “demonstrating more courage than his predecessors”.

The *taz* commented that Germany “has a special responsibility for Israel”, but this does not mean “bowing down to the Israeli government, as Germany has done too long in the case of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu”. Gabriel had put an end to this policy.

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* criticized “Netanyahu’s affront” and demanded: “Germany should not be intimidated by this”. The paper praised Gabriel for not “kowtowing”: “An attitude which deserves respect”.

There are a number of reasons for Gabriel’s behaviour—but opposition to Israel’s occupation policy and concern for

Israeli democracy is clearly not one of them. Germany has been one of Israel’s most important arms suppliers for decades and also works closely with Tel Aviv in the field of internal security. It has consistently supported Israel’s wars against its Arab neighbours and the Palestinians, and has also tolerated its brutal occupation policy.

If the German government is now changing its attitude and is looking for conflict with the Israeli government, and German newspapers are placing the Israeli regime on a par with the Russian and Turkish governments, then this is bound up, above all, with recent geopolitical changes and Germany’s efforts to free its foreign policy from political dependence on the US in order to once again take to the world stage as a great power.

Gabriel deliberately provoked the scandal with Netanyahu. Already in February, the German government canceled regular German-Israeli government consultations planned for May. It declared that problems finding a suitable time to meet were behind the move, but the cancellation was generally understood as a rebuff to the Israeli government.

That same month, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel met with the two organisations, which have now met with Gabriel, drawing an angry response from the Israeli government. Gabriel had therefore been warned that a meeting with the NGO’s critical of the Israeli government would trigger a negative reaction from Netanyahu. These organizations, according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, receive “considerable financing from the EU and also from the German foreign office”.

Germany’s new tone against Israel is mainly due to the election of Donald Trump in the US. The Trump government’s readiness to support the settlement policy of the Netanyahu government and depart from the so-called two-state solution collides with German interests in the region. The proposed two-state solution was never a viable option for the Palestinians, but helped Arab regimes with which the German government maintains close relations save face.

The Middle East, which was under British and French influence after World War I, and under US influence after World War II, has long been a target for German interests.

Unlike other countries, Germany does not import much oil and gas from the region, but it is of great importance as a market for German products and investments. A number of Gulf regimes have also invested heavily in German DAX companies.

Despite the devastating wars in the region and low oil prices, Germany exported goods worth 47 billion euros to the countries of North Africa and the Near and Middle East (Mena) in 2016. This was just under 4 percent of German exports. Israel was Germany's main trading partner, followed by Saudi Arabia. Other countries, however, such as Iran and Iraq, with which Germany previously maintained close economic relations, have enormous growth potential, should Western sanctions and war ever end.

Germany has been at loggerheads with the US and its ally Israel on earlier occasions, e.g. in 2003, when Berlin refused to support George W. Bush's war against Iraq. Trump's erratic Middle East policy, ranging from cooperation with Moscow and Damascus to air raids on Syria and threats of war against Iran, is undermining German interests in the region. Berlin is responding with an increasingly aggressive foreign policy.

In 2014, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier announced at the Munich Security Conference that Germany must "be prepared to intervene earlier, more decisively and substantially in foreign and security policy." He said Germany was "too big and too important" to restrict itself "to commenting on world politics from the sidelines". This program has been systematically implemented since, also relying on the EU.

The policy of the government of Netanyahu, which feels strengthened by Trump's presidency, is regarded as an obstacle by the German government. Berlin is taking advantage of the broad disgust with Netanyahu to mobilize former liberal layers behind its imperialist foreign policy. It is significant that more liberal newspapers such as *taz*, *Frankfurter Rundschau* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* have been most forthright in their support for Gabriel.

In the history of the federal republic, relations with Israel were always a special case due to the Holocaust. In 2008, German Chancellor Angela Merkel still declared in a speech to the Israeli parliament: "Every federal government and every chancellor before me was committed to the special historic responsibility of Germany for the security of Israel. This historic responsibility on the part of Germany is integral to the country's *raison d'État*".

In fact this is a myth. The German relationship with Israel was always guided by its own imperialist interests.

After defeat in the Second World War, good relations with Israel served above all to improve Germany's damaged reputation. To this end, the German parliament passed a

German-Israeli agreement in 1953 with votes from the Social Democrats, but with considerable resistance from the ruling conservative's camp. The agreement obligated Germany to make reparation payments to Israel and opened up trade relations between the two countries.

The Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb), which is under the control of Interior Ministry, frankly states why the Federal Republic benefited from the agreement: "After the barbarism of the Nazi era, the agreement sent a signal to the whole world of a new beginning paving the way for the rehabilitation of Germany".

Nevertheless, the two countries only established diplomatic relations in 1965, 12 years later. The problem was not Tel Aviv, which had long pressed vainly for the normalization of relations, but rather the government in Bonn. The Adenauer government did not want to jeopardize its good relations with Arab states. The latter threatened to recognise East Germany diplomatically if the Federal Republic recognized Israel. West Germany would then have had to immediately break off relations with the Arab states due to its so-called Hallstein doctrine.

Despite this, mutual armament supplies and military cooperation were undertaken by Germany and Israel as early as in 1957, only two years after the founding of the Bundeswehr. German Defense Minister Franz-Josef Strauss and the Israeli Secretary of State Simon Peres had agreed on it in secret negotiations. "Tanks instead of diplomats" was their unspoken slogan. "Political interests and moral convictions seemed to have been balanced out for the next few years to the benefit of both states", the bpb cynically notes.

Today, the relationship with Israel is once again a foreign policy bargaining chip as Germany strives for world power. To this end, the repugnant and reactionary policy of Netanyahu serves merely as a pretext.



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