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Germany and Israel: Is It Friendship?

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In the second of two posts on German-Israeli relations, Felix Berenskoetter argues that a shared commitment to the memory of the Holocaust and to Israel's right to exist has not formed a true friendship between Germany and Israel.

When there is a meeting between German and Israeli government officials, it has become a ritual to hail relations between the countries as a friendship. In 2008, even the Economist suggested that '[Germany is Israel's second best friend](#)' (the first one being the US). Is this just nice talk? Few would dispute that the relationship is 'special' in some way. To evaluate whether it can be called a friendship in a meaningful way, we need some basic markers of 'friendship' in international relations.

Scholars have long claimed that friendship is possible not only on the personal level but also between states/nations. Yet only recently literature is emerging which looks more closely at what this involves. [In my reading](#), friendship, and with it trust, honesty and solidarity, revolves around a shared project that both sides are committed to invest in and that provides them with a sense of ontological security. The project is based on overlapping biographical narratives, that is, a sense of a shared past and a shared future. Especially, it requires a common vision of building a better world that binds friends in creative interaction and manifests a productive relationship that benefits both. In this relationship friends regard each other as equals and practice a unique logic of reciprocity in which there is no debt but mutual trust that each side contributes as much as it can to keep the project on track. On this basis, let me offer a few thoughts on whether German-Israeli relations can be considered a friendship.

A potential shared project lies in (dealing with) the memory of the Holocaust, or Shoa. As Chancellor [Merkel stated in her speech to the Knesset](#) in 2008 "Germany and Israel are and will always remain linked in a special way by the memory of the Shoah." Indeed, the memory is a core element of respective national identities, that is, a central component of the self-image each country holds and that allows for a sense of stability in space and time, thus providing ontological security. For Israel's identity as a Jewish state, the Shoa is the most powerful example of a history of persecution and suffering and has become a defining element of Jewish identity as a community of fate, as a vulnerable people, as victims. Correspondingly, it fuels the commitment to create an environment that protects Jewish people from further aggression. Intrinsic to the memory of the Shoa is the perpetrator, Germany, and this memory is also a core reference for the identity of post-1945 Germany. It marks 'Germany' as a nation guilty of having committed (one of) the biggest crime against humanity and sets out the task to both accept this responsibility and build a 'new' Germany that bears no resemblance, and won't allow a return, to the Nazi past.

So for both Israel and Germany the Shoa serves as a negative reference point. It is a memory they vow to keep alive as a warning and as a commitment to explore its causes and ensure something like it will never happen again. It is a shared history neither side wants forgotten, yet also an experience each tries to escape from. And here the two need each other. Israel's recognition of post-1945 Germany as distinct from Nazi Germany has been vital for lending credibility to this new status. And Germany turned into a steadfast supporter of Israel's attempt to create a secure home for the Jewish people. This appears to be a productive reciprocal dynamic.

And yet, even in the attempt to move on, the memory of the Shoa continues to tie the two nations to a past that issues a clear role distribution of victim and perpetrator. Every official visit and interaction takes place in the shadow of this memory and, unwillingly perhaps, revives this role distribution. It puts Germany in the bind to make good for past actions that can never be forgiven and, hence, to pay off a debt that can never be paid off. This inevitably reserves the moral high ground in the relationship for Israel, which can afford to take advantage of, even actively invest in, the German guilt-complex. At the same time, [as Grass points out](#), it inhibits German political and intellectual elites to take a critical stance vis-à-vis Israel out of fear that this will be perceived as anti-semitism, which would damage Germany's (still fragile) status as a pro-Jewish/Israeli state. Thus, for better or worse, making the Shoa the primary place of connection sustains a fundamental inequality in the relationship.

This carries over in the forward-looking element, namely the 'never again' commitment manifested in Israel's right to exist, its security. At first glance there appears to be a shared project here. An obvious core concern for Israel, it is also an intrinsic part



of Germany's project of *Wiedergutmachung*. As Merkel put it in her 2008 speech, Israel's security is "[Germany's historical responsibility \[and\] part of my country's raison d'être](#)" that would never be negotiable. While this commitment appears to be a powerful indicator of a friendship, at closer look it is primarily a source of tension and reveals another facet of the inequality in the relationship. Perhaps most obviously, the solidarity commitment is one-sided; at least I am not aware of an Israeli political leader ever making a similar pledge of support for Germany's security. Most importantly, Israel's security is not really a truly shared project.

Take the current debate over how to deal with Iran. Israel's government under Netanyahu [considers military strikes necessary](#) to prevent the possibility of an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel. The German government led by [Merkel opposes this option](#), not least because it might trigger a dynamic of counterattacks bringing death and destruction to the region, including Israel. Beneath the debate over the right approach (military power versus diplomacy/sanctions) is the deeper question, rarely voiced, whether Israel faces an existential threat in the first place. Even if Iran acquires nuclear weapon capability, would it use such a weapon against Israel? There is no way of telling, but despite the long-standing anti-Zionist rhetoric of Iranian leaders, it is difficult to see why deterrence would fail. That the Netanyahu government thinks otherwise is not because it has superior knowledge of Iran's intentions, but because it views Iran's rhetoric and actions through the prism of the memory of the Shoa. Or, one could say, it mobilizes this memory to lead the debate about Israel's security in a particular direction.

Either way, the Iran issue highlights the scope for disagreement over the conception of Israel's security and how to invest in it. Whereas both Iranian intentions and the consequences of an Israeli attack are unknown, the Israeli government claims to be in a better position to know, that is, it claims analytical *Deutungshoheit* and declares alternative views ignorant, indeed dangerous. Of course, identifying threats to Israel and putting in place protective measures is the sovereign right, indeed duty, of every Israeli government. Yet for Israel's security to be truly a shared project, the German government would need the trust of the Israeli people to (help) decide how to best secure their existence, *de facto* giving Germany a share of Israel's sovereignty. This is difficult to even imagine. And so, we have a situation in which Israel defines the situation and the support required, and Germany, in a sort of moral entrapment, is obliged to deliver.

Disagreement over how to secure Israel also plays out in differences regarding the desirability of a 'two state solution'. Like many others, the German government sees peaceful co-existence with a Palestinian state as the best path towards sustainable security for Israel and peace in the region. And so, when Berlin shows solidarity with Israel on controversial issues and quietly finances Israel's military build-up, it expects reciprocity through credible moves towards solving the conflict with the Palestinians, first and foremost by putting on hold its policy of territorial expansion through Jewish settlements. Yet this has not happened. It is an open secret that the Netanyahu government does not care much about the vision of a two-state solution and, hence, invests as little as possible in it, [causing disappointment](#) and [frustration in Berlin](#).

In short, it appears that Germany and Israel have not succeeded in turning their historical connection into a shared project around which a true friendship can form. I won't speculate why this is so. What is clear is that the potential for friendship is gradually shrinking, at least on the German side. Merkel's frustration with the Netanyahu government sits on top of a waning sympathy for Israel in the German public, which, it seems, has long noted the absence of a shared project. [Surveys show](#) a low interest in deeper ties with Israel linked to the perception that the Israeli government lacks commitment to solve the conflict with the Palestinians and pursues oppressive and expansionist policies, undermining the credibility of Israel's victim identity. Germany's political elite, and Merkel especially, have long tried to compensate for this, yet *Staatsräson* cannot ignore public opinion forever. It certainly cannot build a friendship over it. So if it is to be more than rhetoric, an honest debate, [provoked by Grass](#) and [others](#) over the nature of the relationship is urgently needed – not only in Germany but also in Israel.

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