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An Act of Friendship? Re-reading Grass on German-Israeli relations

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In the first of two posts on German-Israeli relations, Felix Berenskoetter goes against the grain to ask whether the controversial poem by Guenter Grass 'What must be said' can be read as an act of friendship vis-à-vis Israel.

In April this year, Günter Grass, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature and one of Germany's most respected living novelists, [wrote a poem](#) that was published on the front page of a leading daily German newspaper. The poem critically addressed the possibility of an Israeli attack of Iran and warned about Germany's role in this configuration.

Specifically, Grass claims that, by playing with the idea of a pre-emptive military strike on Iran, Israel is endangering 'world peace'. He also criticizes a Western double-standard in quietly tolerating Israeli nuclear arsenal while disallowing it to other states in the region. His main target is the silence (or so he claims) in Germany over these issues, sustained by historical guilt that generates a felt obligation to unconditionally support Israel and to avoid critique as not to be accused of anti-semitism. Grass warns that this puts Germany in a problematic position as an Israeli attack on Iran would make Germany complicit in a crime, not least because it supplies Israel with military equipment, especially submarines capable of launching nuclear warheads. The poem concludes with a call for efforts to counter Israeli plans to attack Iran and to place both Israeli and Iranian nuclear potential under international control regimes. While Grass puts all this forward as a personal concern, it is clear that he sees himself speaking as a public intellectual, a representative of a particular generation if not the German people as such.

The poem sparked a [heated debate in Germany](#). There was some tacit support for Grass, yet the overall reaction was negative, critical of the poem's content and of (what were thought to be) Grass's intentions. The mildest critique came from those denouncing the poem as being of poor literary quality and unnecessary. They held that there was no silence on the issue in Germany and rejected Grass' suggestion that he broke a taboo. Others accused Grass of being ill-informed and lacking empathy for Israel's position. The most common (and safest) critique was that he made a factual error when noting that Israel would launch a strike that could wipe out the Iranian people, which was seen as a perverse turn on Iranian rhetoric regarding Israel. Some argued that Grass is not in the right position to criticize Israel because of his personal history – having been drafted to the SS as a 17 year-old – and because as a German he cannot understand the situation Israel finds itself in. The loudest critique came from those who read the poem as an example of anti-semitism. They saw it as a verbal attack on Israel's existence and accused Grass of siding with Iran in pursuing an aggressive agenda against Israel. There even were [suggestions](#) that the poem was an attempt of self-therapy, catering to a subconscious hope for the eradication of Israel as not to be reminded of historical sins.

It is perhaps not surprising that, annoyed with what they saw was Grass' misreading of the situation and his moralizing stance, the critics claimed the analytical and moral high-ground for themselves. Yet one intriguing aspect that has hardly been picked up is this: Grass says in his poem that he is attached [*verbunden*] to Israel and, in [subsequent interviews](#), that he wrote as a friend of Israel. Many of his critics thought otherwise, exemplified in the statement by the director of the American Jewish Committee in Berlin "[Grass does terrible harm to German-Israeli friendship](#)". Who is right?

Let us assume, for the moment, that there is a friendship between Germany and Israel (I explore this assumption in a follow-up post). While I have no way of telling whether Grass himself has friendly feelings towards Israel, it is possible to assess whether his poem can be read as an act of friendship. A classical Greek reading would tell us that true friendship is characterized not merely by reciprocated goodwill, but by similarity in virtue, or moral judgment, that is, knowing how to act in the right way. By sharing an understanding of virtuous behavior, friends also act as moral witnesses for each other. This means that one has the duty to warn/criticize the friend if one thinks that (s)he deviates from the right path. When disagreements arise, true friends will attempt to understand their respective positions to then try and solve the disagreement.



With this in mind, does Grass' poem qualify as an act of friendship? To start with, I do not think the points raised by the critics add up to a *disqualification*. Most observers, including thoughtful critics, agree that Grass' intervention, or his thinking in general, is not anti-semitic or anti-Israeli in either substance or motivation. A sign of this is that, exceptions aside, the poem raised few eyebrows inside Israel where the Iran issue is hotly debated and the military option criticized by many Israelis, including the former head of the Mossad. Grass also was eager to clarify that he meant to criticize the current Israeli government rather than 'Israel' as such. The view that Grass is an old man who does not understand, or adequately engage, the politics of the Middle East also is not convincing. The political dynamics are complex and difficult to grasp for anyone, as they involve a variety of actors and agendas reaching far beyond the region and impossible to cover in a short poem. That said, few scholars would find that Grass' text contains factual inaccuracies.

Of course, the scenario that an Israeli strike sets the region on fire (more so than it already is) is speculation. Yet it is a widely shared concern. And while Grass' decision to label Israel – the policies of the current government – a threat to 'world peace' lacks balance, it does not mean that Grass sides with Iran (whatever that entails) or does not care about Israel. In interviews, Grass explained that the poem does not deal with Iran because the regime in Tehran receives plenty of critical scrutiny in the West, in contrast to (Germany's position vis-à-vis) Israel. So the poem can be seen as an attempt to balance the discussion, but it is more than that. Grass noted that anyone who cares about Israel had the duty, or responsibility, to try and prevent its government from embarking on a self-destructive path. From that angle, highlighting the German reluctance to criticize Israeli policies while supplying military equipment forms into a clear message: this is solidarity gone wrong. And to critically interrogate this form of support from the position of *Verbundenheit* is not an attempt to harm Israel, but the opposite: to the extent that the poem is an attempt to help Israel in making a virtuous decision about how to control nuclear potential in the region, without war, it is an act of true friendship.

Granted, this reading may be a bit too generous. For instance, one would expect from a friend more sympathy for Israeli fears, however exaggerated they may be. Moreover, the poem speaks primarily to a German audience. It has a strong reflexive element and gives Grass the position of a moral witness not so much towards Israel but towards Germany, in two ways. First, his intervention can be seen as an attempt to remind Germans, in particular the Merkel government, what true friendship requires (criticizing bad decisions) and what not (silently supporting bad decisions). This is intertwined with, second, addressing an ethical tension in German policy: For Grass the mantra of *Wiedergutmachung* has misled Germans to 'lie' about Israel's nuclear arsenal and to militarily support an Israel that threatens to trigger a regional war. Therein is a critique of how the attempt to compensate for historical guilt has compromised the principle of anti-militarism guiding post-war German foreign policy. So when Grass says he raised his voice as a 'responsible citizen', one could say he acts as a friend of Germany's 'civilian power' identity.

It is perhaps a shortcoming that Grass failed to acknowledge efforts by the Merkel government to discourage Israel from attacking Iran. That said, and to return to his main point, I think Grass was largely correct in noting that there has been a silence in Germany on the issue of Israel. To be sure, others addressed the relationship in critical yet thoughtful terms before Grass did, and some German officials had voiced their concern about the hawkish attitude of Netanyahu's government. Yes there is no doubt that feelings of guilt and the historical commitment to solidarity with Israel, impressively reiterated by Merkel in a speech to the Knesset in 2008, constrained criticism on official level and in public discourse. Even the scholarly literature on German-Israeli relations remains sparse, at least when compared to other 'special relationships' Germany has with the US, France or, more recently, Poland. This *is* a problem. While friendship can exist in silence, the silence Grass pointed to is a missing discussion on what the terms of the special relationship are – or should be.

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