

# Talking About Israel A German Debate

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## Foreword

As I begin writing this foreword in the hot summer of 2022, a huge debate is raging in Germany about documenta fifteen, the international art exhibition. In politics, culture, and the (social) media, there are heated discussions taking place about artworks from Indonesia, Gaza, and Tunisia.

What one side sees as blatant antisemitism, the other interprets as a critique of Israel's occupation policy and militarism. One side sees the floodgates being opened to the acceptance of antisemitism and an erosion of the refusal to draw a line under the process of coming to terms with the past. The other side complains about censorship and about accusations of antisemitism being instrumentalized.

In 2002, during the first summer I spent in Germany, another debate about antisemitism and Israel dominated the headlines for weeks. Back then – shortly before the federal Bundestag elections – the discussion was about anti-Israel statements that had been made by acting FDP chairman Jürgen Möllemann. He had argued that terror attacks against Israeli civilians were justified and that, in Germany, Jews like Michel Friedman, then still Vice President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, were to blame for antisemitism. Five days before the Bundestag elections, Möllemann had eight million pamphlets sent out with a picture of Friedman and the Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon printed on them. He accused the men of sending tanks into refugee camps and of characterizing criticism of such measures as antisemitic. Was Möllemann thereby revealing himself to be an antisemite? Or was he breaking a “taboo” by criticizing Israel? The debate was highly emotional – as if one's position on Möllemann was more important than the election of the federal chancellor.

The 2002 Möllemann debate and the 2022 documenta debate revolved around the same issues: Was German guilt about and responsibility for the Holocaust being instrumentalized to immunize Israel against criticism? Or, in other words: Should people in Germany show more consideration for Israel than other Western democracies?

This book looks at the German discussion about Israel. This is a debate that is particularly explosive despite – or maybe because of – the growing distance to the Holocaust.

It was in May 2021 at the latest that I decided to write a book about the German Israel debate. I was standing at the Hauptwache, a central meeting point in the heart of Frankfurt, behind a police blockade, watching two demonstrations take place. On one side, people who sympathized with Palestine were gathering, on the other, Israel supporters. A military conflict had been raging in Israel and Gaza for a week and had claimed dozens of lives (predominantly Palestinian). In some Jewish-Arab cities in Israel, civilians were even attacking each other. I had made my way to the Hauptwache because I couldn't sit in front of the television any longer; I needed to be with other people who were just as overwhelmed by the situation as I was. But my helplessness and bewilderment only grew when I saw the demonstrations. The fans were screaming at each other like in a stadium. Between them stood the police. I was already familiar with such scenes from earlier bouts of the Middle East conflict.

Israelis and Palestinians have a similar sense of humour. We smile knowingly when it comes to the Germans, a nation of 80 million Middle East experts. Even if we only rarely say it, we all know that the most passionate supporters of the Israeli and Palestinian causes live in Germany – but most of them don't have the foggiest idea of the situation on the ground.

Alongside the supporters on each side, there are many people who unsurprisingly want us to finally make peace. I recently read an interview with somebody who was terminally ill. In response to the question of whether there was anything he wished he could have done during his life, he said: "Of course, I would have liked to have saved the world. Solved the Middle East conflict. That's not going to happen anymore."<sup>1</sup> The man hadn't even been to Israel but still saw solving the conflict there as something on a par with world peace.

In conversations, I have asked again and again: Why are you so interested in our conflict? Most people are initially confused that I am even asking the question. Many Germans won't hesitate to dispense well-meaning advice about how we Israelis and Palestinians could solve our conflict.

One of these ideas has stuck in my memory. I hadn't even been in Germany for a year when a Munich-based theologian contacted me trying to advertise his vision of peace. He brought two pictures with him to our meeting, his sketches for a new Jewish temple. Temple Mount in Jerusalem is the one of the most contentious issues in the Jewish-Arab conflict. This is because the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque are located on the site where the first and second Jewish temples stood before they were destroyed. My interlocutor's idea was to erect a new, third Jewish

temple on Temple Mount – or, to be more precise: above Temple Mount. That is, either on a “platform” above the mount or “without support from the ground, sustained by some sort of an airship.”<sup>2</sup> Why hadn’t any Israelis or Palestinians had this brilliant idea themselves? My attempt to explain to the well-meaning theologian that his idea might function in theory but certainly would not in practice, in modern-day Jerusalem, failed miserably. He is still trying in vain to find supporters for his vision.

It goes without saying that everybody is free to formulate their own opinions on all manner of conflicts all over the world and to come up with their own solutions. However, I think that it would do the discussion in Germany good if its society started examining what exactly is influencing local views of the Middle East conflict. It is clear that the history of the Holocaust and a certain accompanying deflection of guilt and memory are involved. However, many people don’t even reflect on this. Perhaps this is why there is a popular belief in Germany that the Israelis are today’s Nazis. For example, a series of Bielefeld studies on group-focused enmity has shown that more than half of the German population regularly agrees with the following statement in full or in part: “In principle, what the state of Israel is doing today with the Palestinians is nothing different to what the Nazis did with the Jews.”<sup>3</sup>

Every now and again people approach me with these kinds of comparisons, sometimes explicitly and sometimes more subtly. In 2009, the Rhineland Evangelical Academy invited me to speak at a conference about the Israeli settler movement. In the evening, we watched the Israeli film “Waltz with Bashir,” which documents an Israeli soldier’s memories of the First Lebanon War in 1982. I was sitting in front of the screen, captivated, when I heard my neighbour say to his wife: “Everything the Israelis are doing there they learned from the SS.”

What is the function of Germany’s relationship with Israeli in German politics and society? Its relationship with Jews in general and, quite specifically, its connection with the Jewish state, forms an important part of the German project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coming to terms with the past. Historian Daniel Cil Brecher explains the “turn” toward Israel by identifying it as an “element of the new political identity of the FRG and its elites.” Support for Israel, he says, has become a symbol of one’s own democratic, tolerant, and liberal self-image.<sup>4</sup> With the fall of the Wall and the end of the Cold War, Germany’s self-imposed commitment to the Jewish state took on an increasingly major role as a moral compass in German foreign affairs in that it became Germany’s reason of state. It was considered proof

that the FRG was morally superior to the anti-Israeli GDR. Once the enemy was no longer standing on the other side of the Berlin Wall, this self-assurance became more and more important. It gave the FRG the feeling that it was on the right side. Maybe it is no coincidence that, of all people, it was the federal chancellor who had been socialized in the GDR who made the friendship with Israel the cornerstone of her foreign policy more than any of her predecessors had done. And thus, a path leads from the so-called *Wiedergutmachung* agreement or Reparations Agreement between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany 70 years ago to the speech held by former federal chancellor Angela Merkel in front of the Knesset in 2008, in which she declared Israel's security to be Germany's "reason of state."

This does not mean that the West German state had always been positively predisposed toward Israel in the preceding 70 years. For example, after the founding of the FRG, it took more than fifteen years before the Federal Republic was finally prepared to resume official diplomatic relations with Israel. It had refused to do so for the duration of the *Wirtschaftswunder* – nobody wanted to anger the Arab states as customers and as suppliers of raw materials. In the GDR, anti-Zionism was even on the government agenda.<sup>5</sup>

However, is it clear that Germany now has a close political relationship with Israel, which is borne by cross-party consensus. Over the years, rapprochement has moved closer and closer to the centre of political discourse. If you enter the word "Israel" into the digital holdings of the German Bundestag, it appears between 70 and 450 times per legislative period during the Bonn Republic. After reunification, Israel's presence became increasingly felt in laws, motions, questions to parliament, and speeches given in the plenary: during the twelfth Bundestag (1990–1994), it was mentioned 600 times, during the nineteenth Bundestag (2017–2021), a record 2,097 times.<sup>6</sup>

One prominent example of the political discussion about Israel was the Bundestag resolution passed in May 2019 condemning the anti-Israel BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions). The members of parliament justified their resolution by pointing to the German responsibility for the Holocaust – and to the antisemitic patterns of argument and methods used by the BDS movement.

The good state of German-Israeli relations is not reflected in the majority of the population, at least not to the same degree. Although everybody has an opinion on Israel, only seven percent of Germans have actually been there, according to a 2022 study.<sup>7</sup> This percentage would probably be even lower if trips to Israel weren't

generously supported by policy, be it within the scope of youth exchange projects, education trips, or sister city partnerships.<sup>8</sup>

In light of Israel's ongoing conflict with the Palestinians without any prospects of a workable peace agreement, and taking into account growing nationalist and right-wing extremist forces in Israeli politics and society, the highly praised connection between Israelis and Germans is becoming less and less attractive to the latter. There seems to be a gap between the (more or less pro-Israel) elite and the (more or less anti-Israel) population. On the one hand, declarations of political solidarity are considered good etiquette in German politics. On the other hand, studies show that the general population is losing sympathy for Israel and that "Israel-based antisemitism" is on the rise.<sup>9</sup>

This is accompanied by a second effect: German society is becoming increasingly diverse. Even now, more than one-quarter of the population has a so-called migration background. In the development of political objectives, more and more people are having a say whose family roots do not lie in Germany or Europe. Many of them come from countries shaped by Islam, where public discourse on Israel is much more negative than in the Federal Republic of Germany. And in the culture and art scenes, there is a burgeoning postcolonial self-image. Many people engaged in the cultural sector want to open themselves up to the Global South and therefore condemn Israel as a product of European colonialism. The official political discourse on Israel seems to get in the way when it comes to taking to the international stage unencumbered – because that is where declarations of solidarity with Palestine are expected.

This book addresses these fundamental conflicts. *In the first chapter*, it enquires into the political *development of the German view of Israel*: How did Israel's security come to be declared Germany's reason of state? How does the interplay between symbolic politics, armament interests, and morality function? And finally: What are the consequences of the developments taking place in Israeli society and politics for Germany's self-imposed commitment? Can it be maintained in its present form?

*Chapter two* examines the political and cultural conflicts surrounding Israel in the *discussion of the BDS movement*. This discussion is representative of the way that the German view of Israel is currently being renegotiated.

*The third chapter* directs its attention at *left-wing milieus*. There is hardly any other country in Europe where the topic of Israel plays such a role in identity-building for

the left as it does in Germany. Why does this topic polarize people who have the same values and worldviews, and who all proclaim to have learned from Auschwitz?

The book ends with a *fourth chapter* about *German memory culture*. Why is it precisely now that we are experiencing a second *Historikerstreit* – historians’ dispute? What part does Germany’s relationship with Israel play in it?

“Germany has inscribed itself deep into Israel’s mental fabric,”<sup>10</sup> historian Dan Diner once ascertained. Does this formula apply in reverse? This book shows that people in Germany do not think about or talk about Israel in the same way as they do about other countries. It is therefore not so much about Israel and its conflict with Palestinians and neighbouring Arab states as it is about the peculiarities and crises of a debate that follows its very own logic. The book makes the case for objectivization and differentiation in a contentious field in which history and present, realpolitik and moral politics mix. Open debate in Germany about Israel will be possible when those involved reflect upon their own position and agree to take leave of ingrained patterns of argument. This is necessary not just because of Germany’s responsibility for the past but also because of its responsibility to the Israelis and Palestinians campaigning for peace and understanding in Israel today.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview mit einem Sterbenden, <https://plus.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/interview-mit-einem-sterbenden-mein-leben-war-gut-ich-weiss-was-ich-sage-272020.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Gottfried Hutter, *Insights and Steps: On the Way to Peace In the Holy Land*, <https://temple-project.org> (p. 6).

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Zick et al. 2019, *Verlorene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände*, pp. 70 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Cil Brecher, *Zwischen Stigma und Identität*, in: Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Streitfall Antisemitismus*, Metropol, Berlin 2020, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> This book deals exclusively with West German history. The Israel discourse of the GDR is another story that will need to be examined elsewhere. Due to reunification and because the GDR was absorbed into the FRG, the traditions of the West German state seem to me to have more of an influence on discussions about Israel today.

<sup>6</sup> Findings from the research I carried out in the Dokumentations- und Informationssystem für Parlamentsmaterialien (Documentation and Information System for Parliamentary Materials), <https://dip.bundestag.de/>.

<sup>7</sup> Bertelsmann Foundation (2022), *Germany and Israel Today: Between Connection and Alienation*. p. 17. <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/germany-and-israel-today-en>.

<sup>8</sup> Youth exchange projects are funded by ConAct – Coordination Center for German-Israeli Youth Exchange. The German Federal Agency for Civic Education regularly organizes education trips to Israel.

<sup>9</sup> Various studies and surveys have collected data on attitudes toward antisemitism – both “classic” and “Israel-based.” Examples of this can be found in “Deutsche Zustände,” edited in ten installments by Wilhelm Heitmeyer in (2002 to 2011), the “Mitte-Studien” by Andreas Zick (since 2006), and the “Leipziger Autoritarismus Studien” edited by Oliver Decker and Elmar Brähler (since 2002). Moreover, the German Federal Association of Departments for Research and Information on Antisemitism has been systematically collecting data on and documenting antisemitic incidents since 2019, which can be found at: <https://report-antisemitism.de/en/>. There are also individual studies

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carried out every now and then, for example, a recent representative survey by the Allensbach Institute, which can be read here:  
[https://ajcgermany.org/system/files/document/AJC%20Berlin\\_Antisemitismus%20in%20Deutschland\\_Eine%20Repr%C3%A4sentativbefragung.pdf](https://ajcgermany.org/system/files/document/AJC%20Berlin_Antisemitismus%20in%20Deutschland_Eine%20Repr%C3%A4sentativbefragung.pdf). According to this survey, 23 percent of the German population had a bad or very bad image of Israel (p. 39). According to the studies by Andreas Zick, 6.9 percent of those surveyed in in 2021/22 completely agreed with, 11.4 percent more or less agreed with, and 26.7 percent partially agreed with the statement, “In principal, what the state of Israel is doing with Palestinians today is no different to what the Nazis did with the Jews in the Third Reich.” Fifty-five percent did not agree (at all) (see Zick and Küller 2021, *Die geforderte Mitte*, pp. 188 f). The various studies and findings cannot be directly compared with each other due to their different approaches, which is why it is often difficult to identify trends and developments.

<sup>10</sup> Dan Diner 2015, *Rituelle Distanz*, p. 7.

**[END OF SAMPLE]**