

## **The Israel-German Relationship at a Pivotal Point**

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**July 2026**

### **A. Introduction**

Over the past eight decades, relations between Israel and Germany have undergone a profound transformation—evolving from post-war estrangement into a deeply rooted strategic partnership. This relationship, shaped in the shadow of the Holocaust, has become a central pillar of Israel's broader engagement with Europe and, in many respects, complements its longstanding strategic alliance with the United States.

Currently, however, the bilateral partnership stands at a critical juncture. Germany's national security outlook has been fundamentally reshaped by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, while Israel's strategic environment and diplomatic standing have been dramatically weakened by the October 7 Hamas attack and the subsequent multi-front war in Gaza and then Iran. These events have introduced new tensions and caused recalibrations in the bilateral relationship, raising questions about its future trajectory and the connection to the past.

This was apparent when Germany's recent candidature to serve on the UN's Security Council which would have been clearly in Israel's interest, failed for the first time to receive sufficient votes. Foreign Minister Wadepful admitted that support for Israel "may have cost us [Germany] votes but Germany must always assume a special responsibility for Israel with regard to the Middle East conflict. We will continue to live up to our historical responsibility even if at the time we criticize specific policies of the current government". The deeper implications of this statement in how support for Israel could harm Germany's interests should not be ignored.

### **B. From Historical Responsibility to Strategic Partnership**

Historically, diplomatic relations between Israel and West Germany were formally established only in 1965 and even then, normalization remained deeply contentious within Israel, provoking intense political debate and public protest. Before that, Israeli passports had been marked "not valid for travel to Germany" and earlier contacts had largely centered on reparations agreements such as the Luxembourg Agreement of 1952.

The gradual normalization of ties - symbolized in particular by the meeting between Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in New York in 1960 - laid the groundwork for a cautious but steady rapprochement. Subsequently, the relations deepened with high level visits to Israel by the Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1973 and President Von Weizsäcker's in 1987, and expanded within the political, economic and

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security domains. These high-level visits also stimulated growing trade and scientific collaboration, youth exchanges, and intelligence cooperation and generally contributed to the building of mutual trust.

This gradual evolution from the horrific burden of the Holocaust to a shared strategic partnership reached a defining moment during the 2008 visit of Angela Merkel to Israel, when she articulated Germany's enduring commitment to Israel's security as part of its *Staatsräson* (reason of state) declaring:

“Here of all places, I want to explicitly stress that every German Government and every German Chancellor before me has shouldered Germany's special historical responsibility for Israel's security. This historical responsibility is part of my country's *raison d'état* [Staatsräson]. For me as German Chancellor, therefore, Israel's security will never be open to negotiation.”

This transformation from profound enmity to a resilient strategic partnership of intimacy and trust, was an inspiration for humanity and a prime example of how even the most acute conflicts between two peoples could be resolved.

### **C. Germany's Commitment to Israel under Political and Public Pressure**

Indeed, while the commitment to Israel has remained a core national interest for Germany, it is not considered a limitless 'blank cheque' without reference to borders and a 'certain idea of Israel based on the democratic values of the Israeli Declaration of Independence' according to outgoing German Ambassador Steffen Seibert.

This observation is relevant given the protracted and seemingly insoluble Israeli Palestinian conflict that in parallel, has had significant implications for the bilateral relations between Israel and Germany, before and after 7 October.

Successive German governments have consistently advocated a negotiated Israeli Palestinian two-state solution and are highly sensitive to the situation on the ground whether in Gaza or the West Bank. While some will claim that this goal is not realistic or attainable, others including Germany, believe that nothing should be done to undermine that goal (like settlement expansion or annexation) whose alternative is a one-state reality that will not satisfy either national aspiration.

In the wake of the brutal Hamas attack on October 7, Germany remained strongly committed to Israel's security and its right to self-defense considering also that German nationals had been killed and taken hostage by Hamas. As the war continued in Gaza, the unfolding humanitarian situation and the displacement of Palestinians and widespread level of destruction depicted on the international media, had an immediate and considerable impact on public opinion across Europe, including within Germany.

In the summer of 2025, though patience was wearing thin with the continuation of the war, Germany decided not to join Britain and France in recognizing a Palestinian state. Germany held to its cautious process-orientated approach that the necessary conditions had not been met and maintained that recognition should be the final step in a negotiated two-state solution, not a premature gesture.

While Germany preferred to focus on the urgent need to secure a ceasefire, the release of hostages held by Hamas, and address the humanitarian crisis, it did however, impose a partial arms embargo on Israel in August 2025, suspending the delivery of weapons that could be used in Gaza. This temporary arms embargo that was subsequently lifted in November, did not harm the core of the defence relationship, but it clearly signalled Germany's desire to see a more responsive policy from Israel regarding the need to end the war.

There are some estimates that German public support for Israel declined dramatically by 2025 with only 31%–36% of Germans viewing Israel favorably or believing that Germany had a special historic responsibility towards it, compared with almost double that support in 2021. This has been seen by some as a fundamental shift particularly among younger Germans and certain factions of the Green Party and SPD that are increasingly skeptical of military support without a clear path toward a two-state solution.

These numbers confirm the trends that the sense of historic responsibility to Israel because of the Holocaust among the younger generation has declined significantly. While this has not changed the German leadership's commitment to Israel's national security, it would be naïve to suggest that this trend will not have a longer-term political impact on the strength of that commitment.

This tension was apparent during the March 2026 war with Iran when Israel was still undergoing missile attacks and the Foreign Minister of Germany Johann Wadephul arrived in Israel in an exceptional display of solidarity. Wadephul stated that "Iran's indiscriminate attacks have to stop" and that "we are standing with Israel". He added that "Iran's military nuclear and ballistic program has to be terminated in an independent and verifiable way." At the same time, however, he raised the issue of "settler violence" in the West Bank, the humanitarian situation in Gaza, and the issue of settlement expansion in E1. These concerns were simultaneously echoed by Chancellor Merz in Berlin saying that "steps towards annexation ...would make the two- state solution even more difficult. We ask urgently to not work towards the construction of E1...a grave mistake."

These statements reflected how, at one and the same time, solidarity with and support for Israel has become a clear contrast to the evident disagreements with respect to the current Israeli government's policy regarding the Palestinians. The October 7 war and its aftermath has enhanced the tension between these two parallel policies that are now cutting across each other and impacting the partnership. Weakening the relations with Germany will also likely weaken relations with Europe even more.

An additional word of caution should be added. These tensions touched German sensitivities particularly with respect to principles and instruments of international law adopted in the wake of the World War II and the crimes of the Nazi regime. This sentiment was reflected in a statement of Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier, a great friend of Israel, when he remarked that 'adherence to the international legal order must be as central to German identity as its responsibility to Israel.'

The connection between Israel, the Jewish people on the one hand and Germany's identity on the other, will always be extremely complex and sensitive for both peoples. Equally clear is that guilt of the past does not remain the main tenor of the relationship in the present. In that sense, the bilateral relations over the last three years (2023–2026) have changed from an historically inspired "special relationship", to an intricate political and strategic partnership whose scope and importance is not always perceived as such by the broader public.

#### **D. Defense, Trade, and Germany's Role as Israel's Bridge to Europe**

Between 2020 and 2024 Germany remained the second highest supplier of arms (after the United States) providing approximately 33% of Israel's conventional arms imports. Following October 7, 2023, Germany approved over €320 million in military equipment, a tenfold increase from 2022, though in 2024, export approvals dropped by half to approximately €161 million amid increased legal and political scrutiny.

Any subsequent policy differences did not stop the deployment on German soil of the Israeli Arrow 3 long-range missile defence system in the beginning of December 2025. This was a multi-billion-dollar deal, the largest in Israel's defense history, that included the purchase of interceptors and launchers to enhance Germany's air defense.

The transfer of such a highly advanced state-of-the-art missile system could only happen between two countries that had reached an exceptionally high level of trust and intimacy in their strategic relationship. This mutual commitment has developed over the years with intense and direct contacts between air, sea and armed forces, as well as cooperation in the areas of UAVs, ballistic missile defence and frequent intelligence exchanges. The joint flyby of Israel's airforce and the Luftwaffe over Dachau in August 2020 were unique moments in the history of both nations and the first time Israeli war planes flew in German airspace.

The procurement in Germany of four Sa'ar 6 class corvettes and the sale of nine submarines to Israel required literally daily cooperation between both naval forces given the scale and complexity of these projects. Germany has now completed the delivery of the sixth submarine INS Drakon in the fall of 2024 and has also contracted to supply three highly advanced Dakar class submarines by 2031. These transactions included significant German funding and also offset agreements for the substantial purchase of Israeli goods from Israeli defense industries.

Israel for its part has in recent years supplied eight Heron TP unmanned aerial vehicles to Germany for long-endurance patrol and intelligence missions, which also involved training of the German officers in the Tel Nof airbase. Some of these German officers were able to converse in Hebrew with President Rivlin on a state visit to Berlin on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. These are moments of great intimacy and friendship that generally happen far from the public eye like the ongoing close cooperation between the intelligence services that work constantly to prevent threats to both populations.

In January 2026, the two nations signed a new pact to formalize cooperation between their relevant authorities, on cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, critical infrastructure protection, drone detection and defense, civil protection and counter-terrorism. The pact consolidated many intense moments of crucial security cooperation over the previous years that extended the concept of "Staatsräson" to include Israel's commitment to Germany's national security and not only the previous German commitment to Israel's survival.

While the October 7 and the ensuing multifront war in the Middle East created dilemmas for Germany with respect to Israel, the Russian invasion of Ukraine dramatically changed Germany's post war national security environment and immediately required a major reassessment of German security needs.

Under Olaf Scholtz this became known as the "zeitenwende" ('the turning of the times') that would require a rapid rearmament phase and a massive increase in defence spending that is projected to reach 3.5% of GDP by 2029. A major 377 Billion Euro program seeks

to procure defence systems including tanks, advanced fighter jets F35s, advanced missile systems as well as multiple war fighting capabilities.

To develop indigenous state-of-the-art military systems even for an advanced industrial nation like Germany, could take several years and that would not address the more immediate military challenges in an appropriate time frame. In such a situation it would be natural to seek countries with advanced defence systems that are operational and combat proven. Israel was one such ally that Germany could rely on and this was made very clear discreetly at a very senior level to German counterparts in February 2022.

The recent major Iranian missile attacks against Israel have demonstrated the multi-layered air defense system that Israel has developed and used to successfully disrupt and intercept the vast majority of incoming missiles. This clearly impacted Germany's considerations as it assesses the evolving security challenges that Russia and even Iran present to broader European security and stability. NATO has already intercepted some Iranian missiles targeting Turkey during the present war with Iran.

An additional important aspect of Germany's defence procurement with Israel is that NATO requires its allies in Europe to invest in interoperable, cutting-edge and cost-effective defense equipment and NATO can therefore play an important role in helping countries decide how and where to invest in their defense capabilities.

In that context, Europe has become the largest market for Israeli defense exports (54% of total sales in 2025), driven by high demand for air defense systems. Greece for example is finalizing deals worth over \$2 billion for integrated air-defense systems (Barak MX, David's Sling, and SPYDER) and Elbit's PULS rocket systems. Finland has procured the David's Sling air defense system in a deal valued at approximately €317 million. Slovakia has signed a €500 million contract for the Barak MX air-defense system and Denmark and the Netherlands have signed deals for Elbit's PULS and ATMOS artillery systems worth over €250 million and €305 million respectively.

While defense cooperation will not negate German and European concerns regarding various aspects of Israel policy in the Palestinian and Iranian context, it could encourage a broader and more productive dialogue that could oblige Israel to be more sensitive to European concerns. Sadly, there is far less awareness in Israel in government circles and among the public, of the strategic, political and economic importance of Germany and Europe for Israel's standing in the world.

Europe for example, in addition to being the first-largest destination for Israeli defense exports, has also remained Israel's top trading partner, accounting for approximately one-third of its total trade in goods. In 2024, the volume of trade in goods reached €42.6 billion with over 34% of Israel's imports including processed food, chemicals, and machinery, originating in the EU. Approximately 29% of Israeli exports go to Europe including pharmaceuticals, high-tech equipment and aforementioned defense systems and technology.

It would therefore be a mistake to assume that the bilateral relationship rests on intimate military ties alone. That intimacy also characterises other elements of the partnership including the economic, investment and trade sectors, cooperation in the field of health that reached very high levels during the Covid pandemic, frequent senior diplomatic consultations, scientific exchanges that preceded even diplomatic relations, cultural exchanges, Holocaust remembrance and youth and high school exchanges. Germany has

also shown a keen interest in Israeli innovation, digital and cyber technologies and start-up exchanges generally become very dynamic and productive in a short time.

Ultimately, one of the prime objectives of post-war Germany was not only to recognize and commemorate the Holocaust, but also to counter any resurgence of antisemitism and rebuild Jewish life. Tensions in the bilateral relationship complicate and can undermine these factors that have become the hallmark of Germany's modern identity.

In that context, Israel should maintain a very cautious approach not only to the strengthening of the extreme right AfD party in Germany but also to the resurgence of right-wing parties in Europe. While there can be occasional overlaps in policy between governments, ties with extreme right-wing elements in Europe would further undermine Israel's international standing and its legitimacy and particularly its relationship with the present leadership of Germany.

Israel should recognize that Germany is Europe's most influential actor and is uniquely positioned to mediate between Israel and its European partners, particularly amid ongoing geopolitical tensions - from Ukraine to the Middle East. Maintaining this delicate balance will require navigating domestic public opinion, moderating diverse European positions in the EU, and taking into account shifting transatlantic dynamics in the context of NATO.

Throughout the war in Gaza the German government did not only have to contend with a more negative trend in domestic public opinion, but also with calls from within the European Union to suspend the Association Agreement with Israel, restrict arms exports, and reduce cooperation in other significant areas like the Horizon program. Germany has had a leading role in limiting joint EU reactions against Israel, though recently additional measures against extremist settler attacks on the West Bank have been announced.

From the EU and broader European perspective, the war with Iran added to the existing negative approach to Israel because of Gaza. The conflict in the Gulf has taken away attention from the more pressing war of Russia against Ukraine and could have an even greater impact on global energy supplies and the world economy. Higher oil prices have benefited the Russian economy and could also increase Russian leverage in the context of ending the war in Ukraine. Conversely, the increased Russian threat to Europe could continue to play a part in moderating positions with respect to Israel, given the necessity for countries to procure state-of-the-art defense systems adopting a similar approach to that of Germany.

## **E. Conclusion: Preserving a Strategic Partnership under Strain**

Israel has major strategic, economic and cultural interests in maintaining its relationship with Germany as well as preserving its ties with the European Union and Europe as a whole. For Israel, the relations with Germany constitute a strategic partnership of singular importance, grounded in an exceptional degree of trust, intimacy, and cooperation.

The Israel - Germany relationship is still affected by the tragic legacy of the Holocaust but now there is a shared strategic determination to transcend that burden of history through sustained cooperation and mutual commitment.

Germany currently ranks as Israel's second-largest supplier of defense equipment, while Germany is Israel's most significant European client for advanced defense systems. This relationship is characterized by reciprocity: Germany's enduring commitment to Israel's security is paralleled by a corresponding Israeli commitment to German national security

interests. In that sense, the original German concept of “Staatsräson” has evolved but is also undergoing increasing political strain.

German support for Israel has coexisted with its long-standing policy advocating a two-state solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Berlin has also maintained a clear position opposing Israeli actions that could jeopardize the viability of such a resolution, given continued actions that tend to confirm a policy of annexation. The factor will continue to generate growing tension. This issue is likely to also remain a central point of friction in Israel’s relations with Europe more broadly.

Generational change within Germany further impacts this dynamic by diluting the immediacy of the historical dimension in the relationship and German public opinion has shifted markedly by negative media coverage of developments in Gaza and the West Bank. These trends should not be dismissed as mere public relations challenges or latent antisemitism; rather, they carry significant implications for Israel’s legitimacy and strategic interests at the highest level in the medium and long term.

Notwithstanding these challenges, Germany will continue to play a pivotal role in mitigating potential deterioration in relations between Israel and the European Union. While broader European security concerns—particularly those arising from the war in Ukraine—have provided additional impetus for strengthening defense ties with Israel, this will not guarantee the prevention of further damage to Israel’s international standing and legitimacy.

In this context, Israel has a clear interest in Germany maintaining a leadership role in fostering a more balanced and mutually attuned relationship between Europe and Israel. This would require greater Israeli sensitivity and responsiveness to German positions as well as to the perspectives of its other trading partners and key defence clients in Europe.