



**Israel, Germany, America:
Reflections On a Curious Threesome**

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I. "Israel, Germany, America" - a strange trio of bedfellows, one should think. What are the connections between this small Asian power, this medium-sized European power, and this Gulliver thousands of miles away from either, known as the "last remaining superpower?" Let us start with the most important answer: Germany and the United States are Israel's best friends in the world, though each in a very different way.

Why America, why Germany?

Let's begin with the United States. The explanation breaks down into three parts: governance, kinship, strategy.

First, governance.

We should not overrate the domestic character of states as explanation of intimacy. But the United States has always had a special affection for democracies; why else would it have gone to war in 1917, to recall Woodrow Wilson, to "make the world safe for democracy?" Let's not denigrate this as convenient sugarcoating of hardheaded strategic interests. Unlike all other great powers in history, the U.S. has pursued "milieu goals" over "possession goals," to cite a famous distinction by Arnold Wolfers. Habsburg-Spain, the France of the Valois, Bourbons and Bonapartes, the Germany of the Hohenzollerns and Hitler set out to conquer. America, however, after a very brief imperial career at the end of the 19th century, sought to create compatible international environments for itself. These were, and remain, defined by freedom within and free trade without.

And thus in the Middle East, whether you love Labor or hate the Likud, whether your heart beats for the haredim or for Meretz, you have to admit the obvious: that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, and that it will remain so for at least another generation.

Just make this little test e contrario: If Jordan, Egypt or Syria were liberal democracies,

and if Israel were not, do you think that America would think as fondly of this country as it does today? I don't think so.

Second, kinship. As strong as the tie between Israel and the U.S. may be on grounds of governance, it would be less so without some six million Jews in America. No, I am not talking about the "Jewish lobby," though a lobby it also is. I am talking about the unique place of Jews in a unique country.

America is, first of all, a country of immigrants which makes it different from any other Western country. American nationhood is not defined by ethnicity, but by documents - like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. This means that everybody acquired a voting share in the nation, at least after a while: first Britons, then Germans, then Irish, then Italians, then Jews, now Asians. To assert ethnic identities in such a polity is not "double-loyalty," let alone "treason." Everybody has a share, and everybody has a voice.

America is, second of all, a country without an official religion, and if it did have one in the early part of its career, it was dissentist protestantism, not the Lutheran version, which quickly became a state religion. So Jews were not an alien faith, but one faith among many. And considering the peculiar fondness Puritanism had for the Jews, calling their children Sarah and David and likening their own escape to America to the Hebrew Exodus, Judaism was almost better than Catholicism.

Take this story about the 17th-century Dutch Governor of New York, Peter Stuyvesant, when confronted with a boatload of Brazilian Jews escaping from the Inquisition. When they asked for asylum, Stuyvesant asked for time; he had to check with the Dutch East India Company back home. When permission arrived, he fired back an angry letter: "I shall obey your command, but remember this: If you let in these Jews, you'll have to let in those damn Papists, too."

America is, finally, the goldeneh medineh for world Jewry. In no other part of the Diaspora have Jews been as successful, as integrated, and as legitimized as in the United States. Indeed, they are disproportionately represented in politics, business, the arts, and academia. They don't just have a voice, they have a legitimate voice. Hence the special bond between Israel and America that Israel shares with no other country in the world.

But is it just the "Jewish lobby" at work here? Hardly. Nationwide, poll after poll registers the same old story: that Americans of all faiths and persuasions feel an overwhelming sense of friendship with the Jewish state.

But feeling is a fickle force in the affairs of nations, and so we must add to the factors of governance and kinship the third, and perhaps strongest: strategy.

This was not always so. In 1947, the Truman Administration was initially not so keen on supporting the UN's partition plan. The Eisenhower Administration did not exactly

wallow in warm feelings for the young Jewish state - recall the pressure Washington put on Israel after its conquest of the Sinai in 1956. This was the time, when the U.S. was trying to inherit Britain's and France's imperial mantle in the Middle East, when it was courting the Arab nations, when the State Department's Middle East policy was made by "Arabists" up and down Foggy Bottom.

But the Cold War helped. To the extent that the Soviet Union switched from Israel to the Arabs, to the extent to which previously pro-Western Arab regimes like Iraq fell into the hands of "secular socialist" dictators, Washington fell back on Israel, on the one hand, and the remaining monarchies like Jordan and Saudi-Arabia, on the other.

As Arab regimes turned pro-Soviet, Israel offered itself willy-nilly as a "continental sword" to the United States. As Arab regimes and proto-regimes like the PLO turned ever more anti-American, Israel's strategic value grew. As Israel turned into the tacit protector of Jordan, thus helping to reinsure American influence in the Levant, Jerusalem's strategic value grew some more.

This is true even today, when the former Soviet Union has declined into a second-rate power. Israel not only shelters American interests in Jordan; it also acts as a deterrent against the two most fiercely anti-American regimes in the area: the Saddamists in Iraq and the Khomeinists in Iran.

In short, though America has many strong interests in the Arab-Islamic world, which force it to balance between Israel and the rest, Israel is the only reliable and enduring American partner in the area - not to speak of its highly sophisticated military research base.

So there is a most powerful strategic bond: While America is Israel's existential insurance policy, Israel is America's most useful and reliable "continental sword."

II. But what does this have to do with the third in this curious trio, Germany? If America is Israel's best friend in the world, Germany is its second-best - but for very different reasons.

It is not governance, since Germany reserves its strongest affections for its neighbors in the European Union, with France in the first row. Nor does Germany carefully sort its international relationships along the democracy-autocracy spectrum. Just two examples.

Russia, in whatever guise, will always have a commanding position in Germany's diplomatic market - for historical and geographic reasons.

Iran, whether under the Shah or the Islamic Republic, also holds a special place in the German heart.

It is not kinship that defines the friendship. With some hundred thousand members out of a population of 80 million, the Jewish community in Germany is by far the smallest of

the three monotheistic religions. Though it is the third largest in Europe (and the fastest growing, I might add), the German Jewish community cannot be compared to the American one by any stretch of the imagination.

Though reasonably prosperous, it remains socially and economically marginalized. With exceptions that can be counted on two hands, its members do not occupy prominent positions. Not because of antisemitism either official or unofficial; by no means, for in terms of measured antisemitism, Germany is probably the least antisemitic country in Europe today.

Marginalization is generally self-chosen or self-inflicted, having to do with the peculiar origins of Germany's postwar Jewish community. The "founding fathers," so to speak, were mainly East European survivors who had come to Germany as a way station to America or Israel, and stayed for one reason or another. These were people with low education levels, inadequate cultural skills and little interest in reviving Jewish life in post-Hitlerian Germany. This skewed sociology is only now beginning to change.

So the relationship cannot be explained in terms of governance or kinship. Neither is there a strategic interest. Indeed, the claims of realpolitik and commerce would pull Germany in the opposite direction - toward the Arab world with its command over a strategic resource (oil), its demographic strength, and its vast potential market. Nor does a medium-size power like Germany have any major strategic interests in the world beyond Europe. Britain and France used to have them, and sometimes dream of reasserting them. Europe as a whole might occasionally meddle as a mediator, but it lacks the clout and the credibility to shoulder aside the U.S. Only the U.S. has the will and the wherewithal to deal with the Middle East as major strategic stake, the two others being Europe and the Far East.

So if it is not governance or kinship or strategy, what is it that links Germany to Israel? In one word: history, but this, as we shall see, is not all.

Without Germany's horrifying historical legacy, German diplomacy in the region might have been quite straightforward. The Federal Republic might have established intimate, indeed far better relations with the Arab world than did Britain or France, given their colonial liabilities and the vaunted tradition of "German-Arab friendship" forged by Wilhelmine ambitions and Arab hatred of the Western imperial powers. But then, there was Germany's murderous Nazi past.

III. This brings us to a critical point in the story. We are now at the stage where the two bilateral relationships - the US-Israeli and the German-Israeli one - turn into a genuine triangle worthy of the title of my talk. Why? Let's go back to the birth years of Israel and the Federal Republic in 1948-49.

A few months after the armistice in June 1949, the Federal Republic, a.k.a. West

Germany, was founded by fiat of the three Western powers. What was its foremost problem? To begin with, Germany was an outcast among outcasts. Before Bonn could begin to conduct a foreign policy, it had to acquire the right to have one.

To go beyond tightly circumscribed partial sovereignty required the moral rehabilitation of a nation which, in its Nazi incarnation, had perpetrated the most unspeakable crimes against mankind.

Rehabilitation had many dimensions, but one was at least financial amends to the survivors of the Holocaust and to Israel as heir of the slaughtered victims. Realpolitik, on the other hand, required that the new Germany, still an American ward, make a gesture that would impress both the government and the electorate of the United States.

Without such amends, chancellor Konrad Adenauer stated, "Germany could not have achieved respect and equality in the community of nations"². The result was the Wiedergutmachungsabkommen ("Restitution Agreement") of 1952 by which the FRG pledged, among other payments, three billion marks to Israel³.

This was one of those fortunate moments where realpolitik and moralpolitik go hand in hand. West Germany had to do the right thing, and the right thing was also the useful thing to do. And so 13 years before Bonn and Jerusalem actually established formal diplomatic relations, an informal, indeed clandestine relationship began to flourish - aided and abetted, one has to stress, by the United States.

The key role the U.S. played in the background explains why the young Federal Republic not only offered the Restitution Agreement, but also went through with it. Just before it was signed in 1952, the Arab League launched a ferocious pressure campaign against Bonn. Chancellor Adenauer recalled in his memoirs: "I was not willing to be turned aside by the threats of the Arab League." This agreement, he wrote, "rested on a compelling moral obligation" and was therefore not business as usual.⁴ A "compelling moral obligation" there was, but there was also a compelling political interest: keep the U.S. happy, persuade the American public that Germany was willing to make up for its past.

By 1957 a clandestine arms relationship between the FRG and Israel had begun to flourish. At first it was one-sided, with Israel delivering small arms and ammunition to the young Bundeswehr. Three years later, in March 1960, a secret meeting between Ben-Gurion and Adenauer gave birth to a much larger relationship. In the course of the conversation, Adenauer apparently pledged DM 200 million worth of arms plus DM two billion in credit⁵. Though at home Adenauer ran into the opposition of his cabinet, the balance was tilted in favor of Israel. And it was again the United States that tipped the scales of the dilemma. Willing to extend military aid to Israel, but unwilling to reap Arab hostility, the Kennedy Administration encouraged, if not pressed, Bonn to act as the go-between. The triangular relationship was continued under chancellor Ludwig

Erhard and president Lyndon B. Johnson, who also urged the Germans to act as a heavy arms supplier for Israel. The centerpiece of the package reportedly was 200 M-48 tanks which traveled from Germany via Italy to Israel 6 .

It was a request neither Adenauer nor Erhard could reject. To turn down the U.S. at the height of the Cold War would have been suicidal for a country that needed every ounce of Western support in the struggle against Soviet pressure. To make a long story short: One year later, after a grand drama played out in the Middle East corner of the Cold War, Egypt offered recognition to Bonn's counter-state, East Germany, and in retaliation Bonn offered formal diplomatic relations to Israel. The drama was nicely captured in an editorial of the Frankfurter Rundschau : "The Federal Government, facing Israel and the Arabs, has [tried] to land all the fish with a net of semi-formal and semi-secret relationships. The strategy was to be good friends with the Arabs, the arch-enemies of Israel, to fashion closer ties with the Jewish state than met the eye, and, finally, to please the United States." 7

IV. This is how the triangle was forged at the height of the Cold War. The Cold War is over now. So what does this triangle mean today and tomorrow?

As I said, the U.S. and Germany are Israel's best friends in the world. In the case of the U.S., this is self-evident. In the case of Germany, this may not be completely appreciated here because the horrors of history loom so large while the bonds are not as dramatically evident as in the American case.

I am talking not only about the ties of tourism, trade, investment, and scientific collaboration. I am talking about the flavor of EU policy toward Israel. To put it bluntly, Britain and France, Italy and Spain, just to mention four out of the Big Five, are far more prone to conduct a hardheaded realpolitik vis-à-vis the Middle East than Berlin. And "hardheaded realpolitik" necessarily implies a policy tilted toward the Arab world. The Arab nations have in their favor oil, numbers, and markets. In the French case, there is also a strong admixture of rivalry with the United States. So to score points against Washington in the Middle East, Paris will regularly tilt toward the Arab-Islamic world. This is where Berlin's crucial role comes into play. Call it realpolitik-plus, with the "plus" signifying an enduring element of moralpolitik toward Israel. Though mindful of balancing its European obligations and Arab interests, Berlin acts as a discreet advocate of Israeli concerns in European councils, blunting the edge of anti-Israeli resolutions and actions. Usually, it is Germany's conciliatory formulas that win out over the harsh language introduced by the French or the British.

Why do I stress this point? One might have thought that the moral rehabilitation and political reunification of Germany, plus the country's waning strategic dependence on the U.S. after the demise of the Soviet Union , would have tilted the balance of German

Middle East policy toward the Arab world. But strangely enough, this did not happen. Germany is still a friend of Israel, more than 50 years after their establishment.

Indeed, there is an even larger paradox. Why is it that the Germans, now a respected liberal democracy that is surrounded only by friends, still refuse to set aside their past 56 years after Hitler? Why do they still deal with their past, as the Japanese have just begun to do and while the Austrians simply evaded it by declaring themselves "first victims of Fascism?" Indeed, why are the Germans building a huge monument to the victims of the Holocaust right in the middle of their new capital Berlin?

I have a word for this. It is "Remembrance as Reason of State." Note that I am not talking about cheap moral gestures or ritual invocations of goodness. I am talking about a political narrative that recalls the American story of exodus, revolution and redemption, that parallels the French Revolutionary narrative of tyranny overcome and liberty gained (short-lived as it was).

"Remembrance as Reason of State" implies a similar narrative. It has to do with a kind of revolution, too: the destruction of Nazism, the birth of liberal democracy, the assumption of historical responsibility, the battlecry of "Never Again!" It has to do with the rejection of the past and the embrace of a "counter-future," if you will. After 1945, the New Germany wanted to be everything that Nazi-Germany was not. Read the German Basic Law, and you'll see the rejection codified in the way power is dispersed and limited, citizenship is inalienable, individual rights are sacrosanct.

Israel is part of that narrative. Israel is the chapter where the heirs of the perpetrators accept a special responsibility for the heirs of the victims. And it is my contention that this chapter is not just a fleeting episode but part and parcel of the New Germany's reason of state. Or part and parcel of the country's unwritten constitution.

I suspect that this will not be self-evident to an Israeli public which is treated to stories and TV clips of xenophobia, anti-immigrant violence, right-wing rallies, and desecrations of Jewish cemeteries. But I still contend that "Remembrance as Reason of State" is the far more profound part of the story - 100 pounds in one scale vs. five in the other.

How would I prove the point? There is not a single voice in mainstream Germany, meaning 95 percent of the spectrum, which does not condemn these scurrilous incidents, which does not invoke a vision of Germany diametrically opposed to what those would-be Nazis want to be. "Remembrance as Reason of State," then, is reality, not a fancy notion.

V. In my conclusion I want to return to the beginning: America and Germany are Israel's two best friends in the world - for different reasons, but to the same effect. One wishes that Israel had more such "best friends," especially in this neighborhood. But I fear that peace is not destined to be in our generation - how can it be when

handshakes turn into suicide bombs? But I do not want to wade into a debate that preoccupies and tortures this country 24 hours a day. Instead I want to point to the world at large, distant as it may be when fear and hatred overwhelm the soul. Any nation has to take risks for the sake of peace. And so, Israel is lucky to have such friends. Germany will continue to act as advocate of Israeli concerns in European circles, and the United States will continue to act as guarantor of Israel's existence and well-being. In a very nasty neighborhood, these are two friends worth having and worth keeping.

1 The author is publisher and editor of *Die Zeit* in Hamburg.

2 Konrad Adenauer, "Bilanz einer Reise," *Politische Meinung*, No. 115, (1966), p. 15.

3 Until the mid-1980s, payments to individual claimants--to survivors and heirs--came to a total of DM 80 billion, according to German government sources.

4 Konrad Adenauer, *Erinnerungen*, 1953-1955, Stuttgart 1966, p. 155.

5 There are no authoritative German accounts of this episode. For some of the details from an Arab perspective, see Mohammad Abediseid, *Die deutsch-arabischen Beziehungen: Problem und Krisen* (Stuttgart: Seewald, 1976), p. 154 ff. For a journalistic version, see *Der Spiegel*, No. 9, February 24, 1965.

6 See also *The New York Times*, January 21, 1965, p.1.

7 Hans-Herbert Gaebel, "Unangenehme Moeglichkeiten", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, October 31, 1964, p. 3.