



PERSPECTIVES

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AfD: A New Hurdle in the German-Israeli Relationship?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The recent electoral success of the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) is attributable primarily to its anti-immigration agenda and opposition to radical Islam. Numerous German citizens saw AfD as a necessary brake to Chancellor Angela Merkel's "open door" policy vis-à-vis the refugees. But some of AfD's politicians, in addition to emphasizing the danger of Islamization, have expressed anti-Semitic sentiments. For now, AfD is keeping a lid on its latent anti-Semitism by stressing its admiration for Israel's skill at safeguarding its security. It cannot be taken for granted, however, that AfD's anti-Semitism will remain forever restrained.

2017 is proving to be a difficult year for relations between Germany and Israel. In late April, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [canceled talks](#) with visiting Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel over his willingness to [meet with two NGOs critical of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians](#) (Breaking the Silence and B'Tselem). [In an interview with Bild Zeitung](#), Netanyahu said that as a matter of principle, he "does not meet with foreign diplomats who, when visiting Israel, meet with organizations that call [Israeli] soldiers war criminals." He attempted to communicate with Gabriel to explain his position, but the German Minister refused to set up a call. Gabriel [counted on the support of Chancellor Angela Merkel](#) in this spat.

Despite [speculation](#) at that time about Berlin's potential anti-Israel stance at UNESCO, this did not happen. Germany was among the countries [which voted against](#) a resolution criticizing Israel for its policies in "Occupied Palestine" almost immediately after the Netanyahu-Gabriel misunderstanding.

A few days later, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Israel on a delicate mission to smooth over the unpleasantness. While [he agreed with Merkel in](#)

[public by backing Gabriel](#), he avoided the NGOs during his visit. In conversations with his counterpart Reuven Rivlin and Netanyahu, he [underlined the strength of German-Israeli ties](#).

Steinmeier's personal diplomacy helped the German-Israeli relationship return to normalcy, but another hurdle was simultaneously springing up: the rise of the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) and its impact on day-to-day politics.

AfD, a populist, far-right party, was born in 2013. As its name suggests, it advocates for policies that are alternatives to those of the government. Its 2013 creation was [the product of disenchantment with Germany's policy during the eurozone crisis](#) and Greece's stay in the euro with the money of German taxpayers.

One year later, the party entered the European Parliament with a percentage of 7.1. In the summer of 2015, it started to alter course under the new leadership of Frauke Petry, who replaced Bernd Lucke, a passionate Grexitteer. As the eurozone crisis was by then largely under control, the party's attention turned towards refugees coming to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa.

AfD attempted to capitalize on Merkel's "open-door" policy. By employing aggressive rhetoric against refugees and expressing an open dislike of radical Islam, it managed to find fresh public support, and received 12.6% of the vote in the federal election two years later. As the winner of 94 seats in the Bundestag, it is now the third-strongest political party after the Conservatives (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD).

Since AfD was created, the German political establishment has treated [it as an essentially antidemocratic party](#). The inability of Germany to stay immune to the rise of far-right parties, despite its past, has caused international concern. Israel is one of the countries closely monitoring developments. World Jewish Congress President Ronald S. Lauder called AfD "[a disgrace for Germany](#)," and German-Jewish leader Charlotte Knobloch described its electoral success as a "[true nightmare](#)." These comments are linked to clear signs in the party of anti-Semitism, which penetrates the written and oral work of some of its members. As MP of German Greens, Volker Beck, said, "[anti-Semitic people can feel most comfortable in this party](#)."

An online search easily proves these concerns well-justified. A plethora of examples can be given. In January 2017, AfD politician Björn Höcke [gave a speech in Dresden](#) during which he labeled the Holocaust memorial of Berlin a "monument of shame" and called for a positive remembrance of German history in front of an enthusiastic audience. Further to this, in [an interview with The Wall Street Journal](#), Höcke declined to call Adolf Hitler "an absolute evil."

Another AfD politician, Wolfgang Gedeon, believes [denying the Nazi Holocaust](#) is a legitimate expression of opinion. Another, Gunnar Baumgart, [has written](#) that Zyklon B was used to protect lives and that not a single Jew was killed by it. Yet another, Dirk Hoffmann, [has equated](#) Israeli activities in Gaza and the West Bank with the Holocaust.

AfD leader (until the recent Bundestagswahl) Frauke Petry endeavored to calm fears by calling her party a “[political guarantor of Jewish life](#).” Her husband, Markus Pretzell – also an AfD politician – was also keen to forge a pro-Israel line. Once, for example, he said that “[Israel is our future](#),” a reference primarily to the useful security lessons Germany can take from it. The couple [privately visited Israel in 2016](#) and expressed the hope of establishing links with Israeli parties in the future.

During the period of Petry’s leadership of AfD, it would not have been fair to accuse the party of anti-Semitism. Isolated cases would hardly have justified generalizations. However, it is unclear whether the leadership’s main motivation was to sincerely condemn anti-Semitic behavior or only avoid public outcry ahead of the 2017 federal election.

At the end of September, after AfD’s electoral success, Petry resigned and was replaced by Alexander Gauland (and Alice Weidel). Gauland, who had already expressed his belief that Germans “[have the right to be proud of the achievements of the German soldiers in two world wars](#),” lacks the clarity of his predecessor, irrespective of the ambivalent reasons for Petry’s choices. In [a post-election press conference](#), Gauland was asked about Israel and showed a vague willingness to cooperate with the German-Jewish community. He did not call Israel’s right to exist into question, but said “German politicians are not able to provide a straightforward answer” about whether they should send soldiers to support the Jewish state. This remark was largely framed [as challenging Berlin’s fundamental approach vis-à-vis Jerusalem](#). *Bild* [described it as ‘dangerous’](#). In the aftermath, [Gauland was asked for clarification](#). While he stood by his country’s fundamental position, he reiterated his concern that German soldiers could lose their lives to support Israel.

AfD is not anti-Semitic per se. Anti-Semitism does not hold the party together, and its politicians sometimes hold contradictory opinions on the matter (as is true on many other topics). There are party members such as Daniel Rottman who have reacted to Gedeon’s stance by [expressing “love for Israel.”](#) In some cases, anti-Semitic politicians have been even expelled.

However, this does not constitute a *sine qua non* party policy for AfD. [There have been no consequences in all cases](#) and anti-Semitic oral and written work has been tolerated. This lack of either consistency or straightforward

condemnation adds to existing concerns, and Gauland's rather bizarre stance as opposed to Petry's more careful approach is not helping.

Generally speaking, AfD targets Muslims, not Jews. Its political behavior reflects its opposition to radical Islam and its potential impact on European societies during the ongoing refugee crisis in terms of safety, religion, and cultural heritage. Theoretically, Israel could be AfD's model of how to safeguard against a perceived Islamic danger. [According to a survey](#), party members stress this security dimension in relation to their position on Israel.

It would not be wise, however, to become complacent. Today it is the Muslims, but tomorrow it could be the Jews. Needless to say, AfD is a populism machine that regularly constructs and reproduces conspiracy theories. To some, it is in fact the Jews who are responsible for the continuing refugee crisis and the coming of Muslims to Germany. Where nationalism is nurtured, conspiracy theories proliferate, and AfD supporters readily consume those kinds of populist messages. As tends to be the case with far-right European parties, the typical AfD voter has no higher education, belongs to the working class, and comes from relatively poor or underdeveloped regions.

Some historians have taken to comparing our times with the days of the Weimar Republic. Support for liberal democracy is now much stronger than it was then, and is taking the form of resistance to the rise of far-right parties. Germany seems prepared to assume its historic responsibility in response to AfD's electoral success. The participation of AfD MPs in the Bundestag's foreign policy committees is telling, though their future impact on Germany's Israel policy is expected to be minimal.

The real face of the party vis-à-vis the Jewish state has yet to be shown. Security considerations and fear of public ire, which are currently restraining anti-Semitic expression, might eventually be sidelined.

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AfD did not respond to a request for comment.

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