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Merkel's Approach to Israel Has Not Progressed

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: German-Israeli relations are difficult in view of Germany's Nazi past. Angela Merkel does not ignore her country's history, and has played a significant role in strengthening the bilateral relationship. However, new security challenges and problems require solutions. Merkel's recent visit to Jerusalem showed that her approach to Israel needs readjustment to address urgent issues on a practical, not only a theoretical, level.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's contribution to the economic take-off of Germany and the stabilization of the Eurozone is unquestionable. But the legacy she wants to leave behind when her fourth (and possibly final) term expires in 2021 should also include achievements beyond the spheres of the economy, growth, and trade. While Berlin leads global economic affairs, its foreign policy initiatives remain poor. Also, its ambivalent stance during the migrant crisis has caused serious concern about Europe's vulnerability vis-à-vis the rising danger of Islamic radicalization and its influence on tides of anti-Semitism.

Merkel's priorities and weaknesses were apparent during her recent visit to Israel. On the economic side, Germany is very interested in Israel's technology and innovation. German companies, both multinational and medium-sized, invest heavily in Israeli startups and sectors such as sustainable transportation. Also, a few months ago, Germany signed a lease agreement with Israel Aerospace Industries for its Heron TP medium-altitude long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle.

Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signaled their interest in signing additional business accords by touring an exhibit on innovation that included presentations by both Israeli and German companies. The two countries are making a joint effort to facilitate scientific collaboration in several fields of research. A recent analysis by the Federal Ministry of

Education and Research names Bar-Ilan University, among others, as a leading Israeli institution cooperating with German partners.

Bilateral trade volume is increasing. Last year, according to German statistics, German exports to Israel amounted to €4.3 billion and imports to €1.9 billion, which are respective increases of 8% and 13.7% over 2016. From an Israeli standpoint, the German market is significant for two main reasons. First, not only is it large, but it offers the opportunity for highly diversified exports with no dominant sector. Products exported include machinery, chemicals and oil distillates, metals, pharmaceuticals, navigation instruments, and more. And second, by reaching the German market and succeeding in it, Israeli companies have an easier time expanding their presence in other EU countries.

Despite their economic harmony, Berlin and Jerusalem do not share the same views on security. In her public remarks, Merkel stressed the importance of Israel's security. But her theoretical approach vis-à-vis the Jewish state remains grounded in her 2008 Knesset speech, in which she mentioned Israel's security as part of her own country's *raison d'être*. Germany considers it a responsibility to (often, if not always) avoid joining other countries in supporting anti-Israel votes at the UN.

While this may be true, on difficult issues the Chancellor continues to refrain from taking critical steps to demonstrate that she does indeed value Israel's security. By supporting the JCPOA, for instance, she is turning a blind eye to Tehran's ballistic missile program and its destabilizing activities throughout the Middle East. Her primary concern is German investments in Iran, not Tehran's problematic foreign policy.

As far as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is concerned, Berlin lacks the political gravitas to play a role. Merkel's foreign policy on this matter consists of little more than vague statements. During her recent trip to Israel, she said she would phone PA President Mahmoud Abbas and ask him questions about Gaza. She also said her country is making efforts to advance an Israel-Gaza deal, without revealing details. Berlin supports the idea of a two-state solution but is unable to push for its implementation.

Further to this, the Chancellor sees Israeli settlements as an obstacle to peace. Before her arrival in Israel, there were media reports that she might cancel the visit if the village of Khan al-Ahmar were demolished. (She later denied she had conditioned her visit in this way.)

Another problem is Merkel's ambivalent policy during the migrant crisis. Vacillating between an "open-door" approach, the need to appease the ire of Bavaria's Christian Social Union, and concern about new terror attacks in

Germany, she has failed to offer practical answers to the problem of Islamic radicalization in Europe. The domestic political cost for the Chancellor has been the rise of the Alternative for Germany party (AfD).

Many AfD members admire Israel for its security achievements against Muslim violence, and a Jewish sub-group was recently formed within the party's ranks. Still, the future course of AfD cannot be anticipated. A new wave of anti-Semitism might emerge in Germany to amplify an existing stream of anti-Semitic statements and acts. Merkel's diagnosis of the degree of risk led her to enhance the legal framework and appoint the first-ever anti-Semitism commissioner, Felix Klein. It is debatable whether these measures will suffice.

German-Israeli relations will be always difficult and sensitive as they are inextricably linked to the memory of the Shoah. Although cooperation and friendship between the two states have strengthened during Merkel's administration, new challenges require difficult decisions. Influenced by her own economic successes, the Chancellor is keen to find mild compromises that balance divergent positions. But these tactics are not sufficient where security and anti-Semitism are concerned.

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