

Enabling Critique: The use of ‘friendship’ in German-Israeli Relations

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This chapter explores how the concept of friendship is used in German-Israeli relations to voice critique. Specifically, it looks at how German intellectuals, members of the government and media commentators employ the concept to frame and, I suggest, enable critique of Israeli policies and practices. I am not aware of a study exploring this phenomenon, in the particular case at hand or more generally. Apart from studies on ‘naming and shaming’ (e.g., Hafner-Burton 2008), the scholarly literature has not paid much attention to the practice of critique in foreign policy and international relations. Recent work on friendship has analyzed the causes and consequences of tensions between close allies (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010; Eznack 2011) and overviews of German-Israeli relations always include descriptions of disagreement (Gardner Feldman 1984; Weingardt 2002; Wittstock 2016), but none of these focus their analysis on the issue of critique.

Relations between Germany and Israel provide an intriguing setting for such an analysis. Both states emerged after the Second World War and have the experience/memory of the Holocaust burnt into their respective national biographies and into the structure of their relationship (see in this volume Geis Chapter 4). Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in May 1965, Germany and Israel have undergone an impressive process of reconciliation and their close and positive relations were showcased during the ‘jubilee’ in 2015. German government officials, especially, speak emphatically of a close ‘friendship’ between Israel and Germany.¹ At the same time, deep-seated disagreements exist regarding the legitimate borders of Israel, its policies and practices towards Palestinians and the viability of a ‘two state solution’. Despite Angela Merkel’s strong pro-Israeli stance – she has been described

¹ For various examples see the official website of the Jubilee at <https://www.de50il.org/>

as the most pro-Israeli chancellor in German history (Dempsey 2010) – observers have noted significant tensions in the relationship over these issues (Strenger 2012; Ravid 2014; Economist 2015; Spiegel 2016). However, the shadow cast by the memory of the Holocaust and associated perpetrator/victim roles make it difficult for German politicians and public intellectuals to openly voice critique of Israeli policies, especially when they concern issues that Israel considers central to its national security. Simply put, how can representatives of German state and society criticize Israeli policies and practices without their voices being dismissed as inappropriate and anti-Semitic? The answer put forward in this paper is that the German side purposefully employs the concept of friendship to frame their critique of Israeli policies and practices. The basic argument is that this language plays a crucial role in making critique possible – it has an enabling function (see in this volume Srumin-Kremer Chapter 6). In fact, it makes critique a duty. Methodologically I advance this argument through an approach that emphasizes the constitutive power of language and relies on a logic that reads critique among friends as a *Freundschaftsdienst*, an act of friendship done out of concern/care for the other.

The chapter focuses on how the concept of friendship is employed by German intellectuals and politicians over a period of five years (2012-2017) to enable critique of Israeli policies/practices in three issue areas: possible military action against Iran, settlements in the occupied territories, and the stigmatization of left-wing non-governmental organizations. While language can be indicative of conceptions of identity, the analysis is primarily concerned with tracing how the friendship frame is used in these contexts. That is, it understands language to be performative but does not try to explore whether bilateral relations between Germany and Israel can in fact be meaningfully described as a friendship. With that in mind, the discussion proceeds as follows: after outlining the ‘special’ context of the empirical case and the methodological approach, the main part presents the empirical analysis of German critique of Israeli practices on three topics: Iran, settlements, and NGO’s. The conclusion wraps up.

Critique in the Shadow of the Holocaust

Relations between Germany and Israel were born and remain in the shadow of the Holocaust. The memory of the Holocaust is recognized on both sides as the foundation of the relationship, as the element that makes German-Israeli relations 'special'. As German Chancellor Angela Merkel put it in her first speech to the Knesset in 2008: "Germany and Israel are and will always remain linked in a special way by the memory of the Shoah." (Merkel 2008) This, and the joint commitment to keeping this memory alive, means that the historical roles of victim (Israel) and perpetrator (Germany) remain part of the relationship. Still, observers and political leaders on both sides have noted that German-Israeli relations have undergone a remarkable process of rapprochement, if not reconciliation. Central to this process is the German government's acceptance of the state's historical responsibility for the systematic mass murder of six million Jews, accompanied by a 'non-negotiable' commitment for the security of Israel. German governments have underlined this through financial and military support of Israel since the 1950s, as well as solidarity in the diplomatic arena (Gardner Feldman 2012, Ch. 4; Weingardt 2002; Wittstock 2016).

Yet, critical attitudes in Germany towards Israel have been on the rise since the late 1970s (Wolffsohn 1988: 84; Oz 2005: 46; Stein 2011: 62ff). The militarization of Israel's state² and society and the occupation of Palestinian land deemed illegal under international law are difficult to reconcile with the pacifist identity of the 'new' Germany and its status as a 'civilian power', creating a normative dissonance between the two.³ Dissonance does not necessarily generate criticism. As understood in this chapter, critique (or criticism) starts with disagreement between A and B but goes beyond that; it involves A saying to B 'I think you are (doing this) wrong' and, adding a constructive component, 'I think you should do things differently'. When critique is voiced, the question is not so much whether it is justified or valid, as content and premises can always be contested, but who expresses it, how and why. The actions of B may be open to critique by a variety of actors in international society who think that B has violated an agreed logic of appropriateness. What matters, however, is A's

² See also in this volume Beaulieu-Brossard Chapter 5.

³ Some argue that Germany feels (or should feel) responsible also for the well-being of Palestinians (Manifest der 25). Others hold that (economic) ties with Arab countries generate anti-Israeli stances (Wolffsohn 1988: 174ff).

identity and intention(s), especially how they are formed and conveyed in relation to B. Thus, critique is understood here as a phenomenon expressed in a particular relationship, and its political nature and effect depend on the character of this relationship.

Given the historical context, German critique of Israeli practices is highly sensitive terrain, and the question whether, to what extent and how Germans can or should voice criticism towards Israel has been subject to repeated discussions in the public and political discourse. The perennial problem is that critique can drift into an undifferentiated anti-Israel stance grounded in stereotypes and, ultimately, anti-Semitism. And telling these apart is not always straightforward. In fact, voicing ‘valid critique’ can be used to hide anti-Semitism, just as accusing someone of the latter can be used to silence critique (what is known in Germany as ‘swinging the Holocaust-club’). And notwithstanding necessary and often sound efforts to establish clear criteria to distinguish between the two, drawing the line between ‘valid critique’ of Israeli policies and anti-Semitism is also, unfortunately, a political act. Thus, while officials both in Germany and in Israel hold that it is legitimate and acceptable for Germans to voice factual [*sachliche*] critique of Israeli policies and practices (Stein 2011: 64, AA interviews), it is equally clear that doing so always occurs against the backdrop of history and the continuous presence of anti-Semitism (Baumann and Meggle 2009: 275; TAZ 2012; Stein and Zimmermann 2017; Posener 2017; Euronews 2017). Prior to the interventions discussed below, the most prominent example in post-1990 Germany’s political discourse was the debate in 2002 over statements by the politician Jürgen Möllemann (FDP) whose criticism of then prime minister Ariel Sharon caused great domestic controversy and continues to haunt his party (FAZ 2002; Zeit 2009; FAZ 2012a). Thus, policymakers and diplomats are very careful what they say when it comes to expressing disagreements with Israel out of concern that statements may be construed/perceived as anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic.⁴ The headline given to a 2017 interview with the outgoing Israeli ambassador to Germany conveys this cautionary stance: “Mr Ambassador, how does one criticize Israel – and how not?” (Euronews 2017).

⁴ According to Moshe Zimmermann (2015: 46) “it is no secret that...the tactics of warding off any criticism of Israel’s policies by Germany has become standard procedure for the Israeli government”. See also Haaretz (2015). Interviews with German diplomats in 2016 and 2017.

Generally speaking, there are three ways to practice critique in international relations. The first is to voice disagreement behind closed doors and restrict any critique to a ‘private’ setting. The second option is a symbolic act in public, such as canceling meetings and withholding support, without explicitly referring to the disagreement though assuming that the signal/message is understood on the other side. The third way is to voice disagreement and express criticism openly through public speeches, interviews or press conferences. When German officials expressed disagreement with Israeli policies in the past they usually have chosen the first and, at times, the second option.⁵ According to German diplomats interviewed, conversations with Israeli counterparts in private/confidential settings tend to be open and frank.⁶ Yet despite Berlin’s commitment to avoid open confrontation, German willingness to criticize the Israeli government in public has increased in recent years. In fact, and somewhat in contrast to the aforementioned caution, among diplomats there is now a sense that voicing disagreements and critique is ‘normal’. As the German ambassador to Israel noted in 2015 while visiting an exhibition on the shared history of diplomatic relations:

“Naturally we also have different views [*Auffassungen*] and it is completely normal that we express these views; this criticism...is possible without problem *because it is carried by mutual solidarity*. For us the limit of critique clearly is that Israel’s existence cannot be questioned and that the border to anti-Semitism can never be crossed (emphasis added).”⁷

This chapter probes the ambassador’s suggestion that critique is made possible on the basis of friendship, gestured here in terms of ‘mutual solidarity’. While the use of friendship language by German officials has become quite common when publicly addressing Israeli audiences, I argue that it takes on a particularly important function in instances of critique because it automatically rules out anti-Semitic motivation. In fact, it renders critique an act of solidarity. To illuminate this, the next section takes a

⁵ Zuckermann (2015: 36) even notes “Israel was not to be officially criticized by Germany in any way. This has not changed until this very day.”

⁶ Interview with diplomat F, Berlin, 25 July 2017

⁷ Phoenix ‘Forum Demokratie’, 8 November 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpEFycHAZ_0

closer look at how friendship relates to the practice of critique and outlines the logic that makes criticism a *Freundschaftsdienst*.

Approach and Framework

The analytical approach employed in this chapter is informed by the general insight that language matters in international relations. The ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences has brought attention to the fact that language is not merely a means of communication but frames (social) reality and gives it meaning. As such, it also has a constitutive effect on how we relate to the world and to others. Frames provide an interpretation of something by placing it in a particular meaning context. It is a tool for speakers to influence not only what the audience sees and hears, but also how a statement is being understood. Concepts are such frames that gain their meaning in part from their place in a ‘semantic field’, loosely understood as a group of terms and symbols – a web of associated concepts – that relate to each other in a particular linguistic structure. Yet to understand how concepts gain meaning and how they work, we need to look beyond the purely semantic context. This is especially the case for ‘basic concepts’ [*Grundbegriffe*] which, following Reinhart Koselleck, are fundamental features of a socio-political system. They are terms with a prominent place in a political discourse, and analysts trying to grasp their meaning and effect must pay attention to how they are used and understood within a particular socio-political environment, and with what consequences.⁸ Whereas some frames have become so dominant that they are taken for granted in everyday life,⁹ others come to play when meanings are not settled. In the latter instance, a frame, or basic concept, is mobilized deliberately to advance one particular reading of an act, and the motivation behind it, instead of another. This is by no means an academic insight. Political practitioners are well aware that language matters, that certain words are used (or not used) to convey a particular message and that the way state representatives talk to each other, in public and in private, has an impact on their relationship. And German and Israeli diplomats affirm that in this bilateral relationship, especially, officials choose their words very carefully and pay close attention to what the other side is saying (Interviews; Stein 2011: 13).

⁸ See in this volume Ish-Shalom Introduction. For an extensive discussion, see Berenskoetter (2017a).

⁹ Erving Goffman (1974) in his influential analysis talks about ‘primary frameworks’.

Against this backdrop, this chapter takes the view that friendship language is employed purposefully in public and private encounters between political leaders and when engaging domestic audiences. In fact, a basic concept like ‘friendship’ can be integral to the interaction between political actors and to the social contract between the political communities they represent. As Evgeny Roshchin (2017) has shown, friendship discourses can be used to frame and facilitate legal contracts and cooperative agreements, indeed constitute agreements between two parties; they can order relations among them and create a connection not limited to and exceeding formal ties and treaties. This is because, as Piki Ish-Shalom writes in the introduction to this volume, a basic concept comes with “a menu of normative stands and commitments” and so consistent and emphatic use of friendship language is not simply a generic diplomatic trope. While the ontology of friendship cannot be reduced to language, the use of the concept directs attention to all the aspects that make such a relationship meaningful – trust, honesty, solidarity, and so on. It mobilizes these associations and attaches them to the practices in the context of which the concept is employed. This is particularly relevant if the practice is critique.

Because friends care about each other and their friendship,¹⁰ they support each other. One central feature of this is solidarity, or loyalty, namely standing by the friend’s side and lending support in times of need, expressed not only in words but also in deed, that is, through material contribution. Practices of solidarity/loyalty can take many forms, all the way to self-sacrifice, and because they usually are costly they cannot be explained solely with instrumental security or economic interests. At the same time, because solidarity/loyalty is integral to the ontology of friendship, such practices also are not expressions of altruism. That is, they are not simply an instance of ‘Other-help’ (Wendt) but an affirmation of, and investment in, the friendship and a contribution to the shared project. At the same time, solidarity among friends is not about blind agreement. Indeed, friends’ care for each other may also result in and, indeed, *require* them to criticize the friend’s views and/or actions, if they think that these views/actions are misguided and harmful to the friend and to the shared project.

¹⁰ The question of what exactly friends care about requires a deeper discussion of the ontology of friendship that lies beyond this paper. For an attempt in IR, see Berenskoetter (2007, 2014).

Because such critique is grounded in sympathy and care, it also is a form of support, even loyalty.

The reasoning behind this claim is grounded in the Aristotelian reading of true friendship as “the friendship of good people similar in virtue” (Aristotle, Book VIII, 1, 2 and 3), which broadly speaking is about finding an intermediate between excess and deficiency, about expressing feelings and acting in an appropriate and measured way (Aristotle, Book II, 6). Virtuous behaviour, then, is understood as pursuing the ‘right’ ends employing the ‘right’ means. Importantly, for Aristotle virtue is not a fixed property or acquired naturally but, rather, obtained primarily through activity with friends. That is, friends not only choose each other on the basis of a shared ‘sense of...commitment and ends, and a sense of what we take to be ultimately good’, they also develop their moral capacities together over time. From this perspective, ‘the virtuous agent continues to grow, and ... friendship is the most congenial context for such moral growth’ (Sherman 1992: 97-99). This reading of friends contributing to each other’s moral growth highlights friendship as a creative/productive relationship. One central aspect of this is that friends learn from each other by honestly sharing their respective views, experiences and concerns, by listening to and working through them together. This is expressed in friends giving counsel and providing privileged access to private information, considerations, and motivation that are closed off to others. They draw on each other for advice and confide in each other, offering insights into the ‘real’ reasons for doing something, which are not revealed to others. And when their views differ, friends not only “respect and take an interest in one another’s perspectives” (Friedman 1993: 189) but also are open to adjust their views accordingly and recognize the productive benefits arising from doing so.

In their commitment to share and contribute to each other’s ‘good life’, friends do not want to see the other being harmed or undertaking harmful actions, understood in both a moral and physical sense. As a generator of the moral space in and through which both sides unfold, friends also have the unique task/role to serve as ‘moral witnesses’ to each other. So if (friend) A is making a decision or undertakes/is about to undertake an action that (friend) B considers morally wrong, then it is B’s duty to voice its doubts/objections and attempt to keep A from making that decision or

undertaking that action. The same goes for a situation in which A acts in ways that B thinks will cause physical harm to A. To be sure, friends expect sympathy and empathy, or “epistemic partiality” (Stroud 2006) from the friend. That is, in the words of Simon Keller (2007: 31), friends should expect from each other to “make a special effort to see value in your friends’ project before you decide (and say) that you think them misguided”. But once B believes that A is about to make a great mistake, that A’s thinking/behavior is fundamentally misguided, it must voice its disapproval in an attempt to ‘save the friend from themselves’ and bring them back to the right path.¹¹ In such a case, the friend is not only allowed, but is expected to voice critique. One might even say that it is the friend’s duty. Conversely, the recipient – the friend being criticized – can be expected to be open to the friends’ view and listen to criticism. After all, friends are not looking for pretended approval but want the friend to be honest and its support to be genuine. Thus, rather than a sign of distancing, critique motivated by goodwill/care for the other, then, is still about siding with the friend and, as such, a form of loyalty. It is not just an attempt to protect/save the friend ‘from itself’ but also an investment in the friendship, whereas persistent unspoken disagreement may undermine the bond. In short, critique from a friend is a *Freundschaftsdienst*.

Empirical Discussion

Having laid out my approach, the remainder of the chapter examines how powerful German voices – intellectuals, government officials and media outlets – employ the concept of friendship when criticizing Israeli policies/practices in public with regard to three issues areas: (i) military action against Lebanon and Iran, (ii) settlements in the occupied territories, and (iii) the stigmatization of particular non-governmental organizations. The speakers chosen here are recognized as authorities or formal representatives of the state and/or society and are aware that they speak from that position, hence their words are more than private expressions of individuals.¹² That said, the analysis does not treat them as reifications of the state/society. In fact, by

¹¹ Aristotle differentiates between virtue of thought and of character, the former acquired through ‘teaching’ the latter through ‘habit’ (Aristotle, *NE*, Book II). Criticism has an element of teaching.

¹² An exception of sort is Martin Schulz, who at that time spoke in his function as a EU representative.

taking into account a variety of voices, the discussion conveys some of the pluralism that exists within the political and public discourse.

Critique I: Military action

In November 2006, a programmatic text entitled ‘Friendship and Critique: Why the ‘special relationship’ between Germany and Israel needs to be rethought’ signed by a group of 25 German academics¹³ was published in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* (Manifest der 25). The ‘manifesto’ was written in the wake of Israel’s war with Lebanon a few months earlier, in July and August 2006, and grappled with how a German government committed to support Israel’s existence, as well as to fighting anti-Semitism, should react when the Israeli government undertakes disproportionate military action. The authors did not simply cite a dissonance with pacifist principles but noted concern with what they saw as potentially “catastrophic worldwide consequences” of such action in two ways: first, the risk of escalation into a wider war in the region that also involves the US and Iran, feeding the antagonistic identities underpinning the ‘war on terror’ which, second, would exacerbate a rift in the German public between supporters and critics of Israel and fuel anti-Semitic attitudes. The underlying message thus was that the military operation in Lebanon was counterproductive for creating a more secure environment for Israel and Jews more generally. Arguing that Germany bears a historical responsibility for the well being of not only Jews but also the Palestinian people, the manifesto suggested that the German government should do more to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including by scrutinizing the German provision of arms to Israel and taking a more critical attitude towards Israeli military practices (Manifest der 25; see also Baumann and Meggle, 2009).

As signaled by the title, these arguments were made through the friendship frame. The manifesto starts with a statement by Israeli Foreign Minister Zipi Livni during her visit in Berlin on 31 August, in which she characterized German-Israeli relations as ‘special and friendly’. Noting that friendship between political collectives is possible, the authors emphasized that “a sustainable friendship” is characterized by trying to prevent the other from making mistakes out of care for each other’s wellbeing, “even

¹³ Most of them political scientists, part of the ’68 generation and associated with the peace movement.

more so when much is at stake for both sides” (Manifest der 25: 1). The authors did not seem to be convinced that such a friendship existed between Germany and Israel. Instead, the manifesto diagnosed a ‘problematic Philo-Semitism’ among German elites that in combination with “unspoken prohibition of open criticism of Israeli decisions...strengthens anti-Semitism in Germany rather than weakens it”. Against this, the manifesto argued that it would be an advantage for both sides to develop a friendship that is able to withstand stress [*belastungsfähige Freundschaft*] and “in which critique intended to be supportive, not derogatory, has its place” (Manifest der 25: 1-2).

While the 25 signatories did not explicitly declare themselves friends of Israel in the text, the framing implies that the manifesto was written and should be understood in this spirit. The importance of this frame showed in the debate that ensued.¹⁴ Next to discussions about factual claims and logics, the most stinging critique of the manifesto questioned the sincerity of the friendship frame. Thus, Micha Brumlik in his at times polemic response in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* called the “repeatedly expressed affirmations of friendship towards the state of Israel” by the signatories “unbearable”, adding “with friends like that, [Israel/Jews] do not need enemies” (Brumlik 2007). The implied suggestion that the friendship frame was used instrumentally was vehemently rejected by the signatories, who emphasized their genuine concern for Israel and the Jewish people and commitment to German-Israeli friendship, pointing to their efforts of engaging in constructive dialogue with critics, and their willingness to acknowledge weaknesses in their text and to learn.¹⁵

The debate reappeared in slightly different and more prominent form six years later. In April 2012 the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published on its front page a poem by Günter Grass, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature and at the time one of Germany’s most respected living novelists, entitled ‘What Must Be Said’ [*Was gesagt werden muss*].¹⁶ The poem critically addressed the possibility of an Israeli attack of Iran’s nuclear

¹⁴ The manifesto generated a range of critical reactions, from noting that “It was never forbidden to criticize Israel” (Weingardt 2006) to discarding the argument that Germany had a historical responsibility *vis-a-vis* Palestinians (Brumlik 2007). For a comprehensive compilation see Steinweg (2007).

¹⁵ See the unpublished open letter to Brumlik by Tilman Evers in Steinweg (2007: 70-72); Krell (2008); Baumann and Meggle (2009); correspondence of the author with Gert Krell, 3 February 2018.

¹⁶ The Poem was published simultaneously in *La Repubblica* and in *El Pais*.

facilities and warned about Germany's role in this configuration. Specifically, Grass claimed that by playing with the idea of a pre-emptive military strike on Iran, Israel was endangering 'world peace'. And he criticized a Western double standard in quietly tolerating Israel's nuclear arsenal while disallowing it to other states in the region. His main target was the silence (or so he claimed) in Germany over these issues, which he argued was sustained by historical guilt that generated a felt obligation to unconditionally support Israel and to avoid critique as not to be accused of anti-Semitism. Grass warned that because Germany supplied Israel with submarines capable of launching nuclear warheads, an Israeli attack on Iran would make Germany complicit in a crime. The poem concluded with a call for countering Israeli plans to attack Iran and to place both Israeli and Iranian nuclear potential under international control regimes (Grass 2012; Guardian 2012).

While Grass gave the poem a personal tone, it was clear that he saw himself speaking as a public intellectual. Yet although he was not alone in voicing concern about a possible Israeli attack on Iran,¹⁷ the poem caused an intense debate in Germany and received strong reactions from some Israeli officials. As the *Financial Times* wrote "rarely, if ever, have a few lines of modern German poetry created so much anger, confusion and controversy" (FT 2012). Most of the responses were critical, condemning the poem's content, its form, the author and his intentions. Grass was accused of anti-Semitism and an anti-Israeli sentiment (SZ 2012a; Joffe 2012; Brumlik 2012; Broder 2012; Meotti and Weinthal 2012). The Israeli interior minister declared Grass a *persona non grata* (NYT 2012), and the chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany saw him as an enemy of the Jews (Graumann in SZ). An important factor in this regard was Grass' personal biography, which personified the complicated history of an entire generation of Germans. Born in 1927, he was known for his literary works dealing with the German experience and legacy of the Second World War, tackling difficult themes of destruction, discrimination, victims and guilt and probing unpopular ethical questions. Positioned on the left of the political spectrum and active in the peace movement in the 1980s, Grass caused controversy

¹⁷ The military option had little to no support in the US administration and was criticized inside Israel (Remnick 2012). The German minister of defense also expressed strong concern. More broadly, Grass wrote in the context of a deterioration of Israel's image in the German public and an increasing frustration with the Netanyahu government among German politicians (Lau 2011; FR 2012; FAZ 2012a).

when he revealed in 2006 that as a teenager he had been drafted in the Waffen-SS during the last months of the war. For his critics the latter aspect, in particular, rendered Grass a “highly unsuitable critic of the Jewish state” (FT 2012).

Despite the backlash, Grass stuck to his words and countered his critics by noting that he had written as a friend of Israel. The poem merely states that he is attached [*verbunden*] to Israel. It is the discursive moves he makes following the publication to clarify his critique and the position from which he wants it to be heard that are of interest here. To start with, Grass noted that he meant to criticize the current Israeli government, not Israel *as such* (SZ 2012b).¹⁸ This distinction is crucial because it allows him to argue that the poem expressed disagreement with particular political agendas and practices, and that anyone who cares about Israel had the duty to try and prevent its government from embarking on a self-destructive path through “a politics that creates more and more enemies for Israel” (SZ 2012c). Grass uses the friendship frame to argue that true friends must have the courage to speak up and must be listened to.¹⁹ In a conversation on German state television, he proclaimed that he was “worried about Israel...just like many Israelis worry about their country”, and that shying away from criticizing policies that stand in the way to a peaceful region would come close to *Nibelungentreue*, namely absolute and unquestioning loyalty, which he states “is the worst one can do to Israel”. Thus, Grass notes “I wish that many, out of friendship with Israel and also concern for Israel, would break this taboo” and express “valid critique” (ARD 2012). In another interview in October 2012, Grass doubled down on his critics:

“I think the best one can permit oneself to do as a friend of Israel – the state of Israel and its people, and I see myself as a friend of Israel – is to criticize it. The denied/refused critique, an uncritical, quasi philo-Semitic stance, is for me a new form of anti-Semitism!” (NTV 2012)

¹⁸ Grass even changed the verse when the poem was reprinted later that year in his book *Eintagsfliegen*.

¹⁹ Grass already made this general point in an interview with *Der Spiegel* in October 2001. In the context of criticizing US military action in Afghanistan, he stated that “friendship also requires to try and hinder the friend from acting when he threatens to make a mistake...for me such open criticism is part of loyalty”. At the end of the interview he briefly touched on the issue of Israeli settlements, noting “it is an evidence of friendship towards Israel when I allow myself to criticize the country – because I want to help it.... To criticize such critique – we must stop doing that” (Spiegel 2001).

The suggestion that the silence of those who claim to be pro-Israel not only risks strengthening anti-Semitism, as the manifesto had argued, but is *itself* a form of anti-Semitism is problematic. But it exemplifies the force of the logic Grass employed – that it is the duty of the friend to voice critique – to defend his intervention. It also reminds that the primary target of his intervention was the German government for what he sees is solidarity gone wrong.

There are few signs that Grass convinced his critics that he spoke as a ‘friend of Israel’. The newspaper *Die Welt*, which had been a prominent voice in accusing Grass of anti-Semitism, cast doubt on this claim by noting that, reportedly, Grass visited Israel only twice, in 1967 and 1971, thus implying that his practices did not match his words (Welt 2012a). Even one of the signatories of the manifesto thought Grass was using the friendship framework in opportunistic ways “to project his own burdens” and not in the sense of a *Freundschaftsdienst*.²⁰ Yet there were also voices in Germany and elsewhere, including prominent Jewish and Israeli voices, that came to Grass’ defense and accused his critics of over-reacting (SZ, Lau, Haaretz, Grosser). In either case, the debate around Grass’ poem affirmed the importance of the concept of friendship for the semantic field within which acceptable criticism had to move and raised the difficult question of whether it is employed sincerely or opportunistically.

When German President Joachim Gauck visited Israel less than two months after the publication of Grass’ poem, one aim was to defuse the heated debate and to emphasize Germany’s solidarity with Israel, making the official motto of his visit “We Germans stand on your side” (SZ 2012d). In an interview with *Haaretz*, Gauck sought to take the weight off Grass’ words by noting they were the author’s personal opinion, while at the same time voicing his concern over polls showing a critical attitude among a majority of Germans towards Israel. And he noted “we Germans, in particular, should ask ourselves critically: in which spirit do we judge Israeli politics? Please only in the spirit of friendship. There is also place for critique, absolutely, but not for prejudice” (in FAZ 2012). This reflexive move appeared aimed at a German audience, but it also was to convey the position from which Gauck was speaking – that of a friend. The frame was affirmed by his counterpart Shimon Peres who, when

²⁰ Correspondence of the author with Gert Krell, 3 February 2018. See also Krell and Mueller (2012).

welcoming Gauck, emphasized the “close friendship” between Germany and Israel (DW 2012). Notably, Gauck publicly stated that Merkel’s declaration of Israel’s security as Germany’s *raison d’etat* could bring her into political difficulties in the event of an Israeli war with Iran. Widely reported as a carefully worded taming of Merkel’s commitment, it was an implicit warning that Israel could not expect absolute loyalty – the *Nibelungentreue* Grass had criticized – from Germany.²¹ Most German commentators considered this a ‘realistic assessment’ coming from a friend (Zeit 2012c; Welt 2012c). So did Avi Primor, the former Israeli ambassador to Germany, who saw Gauck’s visit and his critique as positive, noting “a friendship must be based on openness and honesty. President Gauck has found the right tone” (Zeit 2012a). Similar assessments were given by the chairs of the German-Israeli Society, the German-Israeli Parliamentary Committee, and of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, who had accompanied Gauck to Israel. The latter, Dieter Graumann, who had called Grass’ poem “an aggressive pamphlet of agitation”, thought that Gauck had “highlighted the special friendship” and found “wonderful words” for German-Israeli relations (in Welt 2012b).

Critique II: Settlements

The second area of contention is the consensus among Germany’s political leadership that solving the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians requires the creation of an independent Palestinian state. The commitment to a ‘two state solution’ has been a long-standing German position reiterated by Chancellor Merkel in her 2008 Knesset speech (Merkel 2008), and German officials see Israel’s territorial expansion and occupation of Palestinian land through settlements that are illegal under international law as the biggest hurdle to this goal (DW 2014; FAZ 2014a). However, the ‘two states’ vision is not shared by the Netanyahu government, which appears to prefer the status quo and the expansion of the state beyond the 1967 borders through settlements, to the dismay of Berlin (Asseburg and Busse 2016; Spiegel 2015a; 2016, AA interviews). So there are fundamental disagreements between the two sides regarding Israel’s settlement policies and practices. The German side voices its position on a regular basis, though prefers to address contentious issues behind closed

²¹ Rather than proclaiming eternal support, Gauck emphasized that “Germany should be the very last country that revokes its friendship and solidarity to Israel” (Zeit 2012b)

doors and ensures that it is accompanied by affirmations of friendship. When it was reported that President Gauck in private meetings with Israeli leaders had noted disagreement with Israel's settlement practices and the importance of upholding the rights of Palestinian people, he was quick to emphasize that all his statements were an "expression of a stable friendship" (Welt 2012b; SZ 2012e; Zeit 2012a). The government also carefully signaled disagreement in public by changing its stance in areas where it has traditionally supported Israel. For instance, on 29 November 2012 Germany abstained in a vote in the UN General Assembly to grant Palestinians 'non-member observer state' status, which Israeli leaders had expected Germany to vote against. When meeting with Netanyahu in Berlin a week later, Merkel appeared eager "to assure that the two are still friends" (CSM 2012) yet at their joint press conference affirmed the position through the remark "when it comes to the question of settlements, we agree to disagree" (Haaretz 2012, FAZ 25 Feb 2012).

Merkel's reluctance to be more direct and open in her criticism prompted voices in the German media to call on the government to be more vocal in its critique of Israeli policies/practices and to put greater pressure on the Netanyahu government to change course. These calls were consistently made through the friendship frame, and often included voices from within Israel to guard against possible accusations that the authors/message was anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic in orientation. Their tenor was that a healthy and strong friendship with Israel not only allowed but asked for more critique. In April 2012, an article in *Die Zeit* entitled 'Cowardice before the Friend' [*Feigheit vor dem Freund*] encouraged Merkel to use the capital she built up with Israel over the years (steadfast military and diplomatic support, her popularity in Israel and her power as the leader of Germany) to push for a diplomatic solution of the conflict with Iran and to "make Israel recognize that without the two state solution nobody can guarantee its security" (Zeit 2012). In the run-up to the 2014 joint cabinet meeting, *Der Spiegel* ran an article entitled 'Silence among Friends' [*Schweigen unter Freunden*] which also quoted the Israeli director Dror Moreh saying that Germany, as one of Israel's closest friends, should voice more "targeted criticism" because "when you see your best friend speeding towards a wall you need to grab the steering wheel" (SPON 24 Feb 2014). The same day, a commentary in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* reiterated that German solidarity with Israel should not entail "unconditional support of every Israeli government", pointing out that many people in Israel "hope that

Israel's friends...apply pressure from the outside to move...the leadership in Jerusalem to take positive steps in the peace process". Thus, "taking friendship seriously" requires facing the dispute over settlements (Münch 2014). In May 2015, in the context of the celebrations of fifty years of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel, *Der Spiegel* published a widely noted article entitled 'The difficult Friend' [*Der schwierige Freund*] in which "outspoken friends of Israel" – former diplomats, high-ranking German politicians, and the Israeli historian Tom Segev – called for a tougher stance by Merkel towards the Israeli government regarding settlements (Spiegel 2015a). And in February 2016 the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* ran another commentary arguing that "Germany must dare more critique of Israel" [*Deutschland muss mehr Kritik an Israel wagen*] as otherwise the friendship stands on shaky ground (Münch 2016).

The Merkel government did become increasingly frustrated with what it considered Netanyahu's lack of sincerity in advancing the peace process. When in January 2014 the Israeli government announced new settlement constructions in the occupied territories, media on both sides reported significant tensions in German-Israeli relations and a growing antagonism between Merkel and Netanyahu (Spiegel 2014a, FAZ 2014a, DW 2014; Ravid 2014). *Der Spiegel* noted that Merkel was eager to use the upcoming joint cabinet meeting in Jerusalem to defuse the tensions, but also noted that both she and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier continued to "believe that Israeli's settlement policy represents a decisive barrier to the peace process" and that they would not shy away from saying so in public (Spiegel 2014a). With Israeli media reporting that Steinmeier had "heaped tough criticism on Israeli settlement policy" prior to flying to Israel, Merkel upon arrival mobilized the friendship frame to set the tone. Speaking to journalists, she explained the unprecedented visit of 15 ministers, representing almost the entire German government, by saying "we wanted to show you in this way that this is indeed a very strong friendship" (Ynet 2014a; Ynet 2014b; Haaretz 2014b; SZ 2014; FAZ 2014b).²²

²² Given this, Merkel's decision to cancel the joint cabinet meeting planned for May 2017 in Jerusalem is particularly noteworthy. It is widely understood that she did so after the Israeli parliament passed a law legalizing a large number of controversial settlements in the occupied territories, a move which "deeply disappointed" the German government (Zeit 2017; Haaretz 2017a).

The importance of embedding critical remarks in such language had just been displayed two weeks earlier when the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, a German national, had in an otherwise empathetic and ‘pro-Israel’ speech implicitly criticized the Israeli blockade of Gaza. His point that Palestinians had less access to water than Israelis was heavily criticized by some in the Israeli government who argued that Schulz had his facts wrong. Netanyahu accused Schulz of “selective hearing” and “accept[ing] any attack on Israel without checking it”, with several ministers going even further and accusing Schulz of “lies”, with then Economics minister Naftali Bennett storming out in protest during the speech (Guardian 2014, Ynet 2014). However, Schulz was defended by other Israeli politicians who considered the harsh reactions as inappropriate and noted that Schulz was a “close friend” (Burg 2014) and a friend of Israel (Haaretz 2014a). While Schulz did not use the friendship frame in his speech, he had done so in a conversation with journalists just beforehand. Thus, when the *Times of Israel* reported the harsh reactions it also noted that Schulz was “surprised and affected” by them and that he had presented himself a “staunch supporter of Israel”. And after reporting that Schulz had been candid in saying that Israel’s settlements in the West Bank are illegal and an obstacle to peace, the article pointedly closed with a quote of Schulz assuring that the EU is committed to friendship with Israel and that “an exchange of different views is not a break of friendship” (Times of Israel 2014). A similar tone was struck in other reports and the controversy lost its edge. This episode demonstrated that the friendship concept can be effectively used by ‘insiders’ to defend a speaker’s motivation or message and, even more so, to warn that hurtling anti-Semitism accusations at friends is offensive. The latter move was displayed in an essay in *Spiegel Online* from December 2015 entitled ‘Polemics have no Place in True Friendships’, which begins by noting “a true friendship thrives on the courage to give criticism – and on the ability to accept it” to then argue that using “dubious Holocaust comparisons” to attack Germans who appear to take a critical stand runs the risk of alienating ‘true friends’ of Israel (Schult 2015).

Critique III: Democracy

The third and most recent area in which German politicians criticize Israeli policies and practices is democracy (see also in this volume Srunin-Kremer Chapter 5). Specifically, the issue is the attempt by members of the Israeli government and pro-

settler organizations such as *Im Tirtzu* to delegitimize Israeli human rights organizations that are critical of government practices, such as *Breaking the Silence*, *B'Tselem*, or *Peace Now*, by accusing them of being ‘pro-Palestinian’ and ‘anti-Zionist’ and by stigmatizing them “as agents of foreign powers” (+972 2016). The targeting of these and other left-wing organizations was formalized in July 2016 when the Knesset passed the controversial ‘transparency law’, which requires them to declare their reliance on funding from foreign governments while, at the same time, excluding right-wing pro-settlement NGOs that tend to rely on private donations (Guardian 2016). While Prime Minister Netanyahu maintained that the law would “strengthen democracy” (Ibid.) it was strongly criticized within Israel and from the outside as undermining Israel’s democracy.²³ Such critique also came from Germany, not least because German *Stiftungen* and the EU provide funding to these organisations and cooperate with them for projects within Israel. In February 2016, the chair of the German-Israeli Parliamentary Group, Volker Beck, described the law as an attempt to target the critical spectrum of civil society, calling it a “chicane” and “a big problem” and expected the German government to clearly address the issue with their Israeli counterparts during the joint cabinet meeting. At the same time, Beck noted that it was important to show “that we stand for friendship with Israel” and express understanding for Israeli security concerns “as only then will our concrete critique of the current government be credible” (DF 2016a).

Merkel’s critique during the joint cabinet meetings in Berlin remained behind closed doors, separated from the wider discussions, and any controversial issues were left out of the official joint communiqué published afterwards.²⁴ However, the issue came to a head a year later, when the Israeli government invited newly appointed Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) to visit Israel in April 2017 for Holocaust Memorial Day. Years earlier, in 2012 then-party leader Gabriel had caused a stir when during a visit to Hebron he called what he witnessed there an ‘Apartheid regime’ (Welt 2012c), and during the 2013 election campaign he had called for Germany to be a ‘critical and demanding partner’ towards Israel (JA 2013). When asked about the

²³ A front-cover article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* on the issue was headed “Israel loses its grip on democracy”. The European Commission condemned the law for threatening to undermine Israel’s democracy, and Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog called it an indicator of “fascism creeping into Israeli society” (Guardian 2016). See also Shalev (2015).

²⁴ A German diplomat explained the positive spin with the request by the Israeli delegation to not have anything controversial in the communiqué. Interview with diplomat F, Berlin, 25 July 2017.

incident on the eve of Gabriel's 2017 visit, the Israeli ambassador to Germany, Yakob Hadas-Handelsman assured "this is resolved. Gabriel is a friend of Israel" (in *Sächsische Zeitung* 2017). However, during the visit Gabriel decided to also meet with *Breaking the Silence* and *B'Tselem*, despite Netanyahu's late objection, which prompted Netanyahu to cancel his planned meeting with the Foreign Minister. This was widely reported as an *Eklat*, an open fallout (FAZ 2017; SZ 2017a). While Gabriel showed himself surprised by Netanyahu's move, as other German leaders had met with these organisations during earlier visits (SZ 2017b), Gabriel's decision not to comply with Netanyahu's objection was a signal in support of these organisations and of the critical discourse in Israel more generally. Merkel's spokesperson noted: "we believe that it should be possible, in a democratic country, to meet with critical non-governmental organisations without such consequences" (SZ 2017a). To cushion the fallout, Gabriel assured during a meeting with Israeli President Rivlin "you can absolutely be sure we are committed to the friendship, the partnership and the special relationship with Israel and nothing will change this." (Haaretz 2017b). In an interview to a German newspaper, Gabriel made a point of the "very friendly" and long meeting he had with Rivlin and emphasized his close personal connection to the country (HAB 2017). This resonated with support from a former Israeli Diplomat and outspoken Netanyahu critic, who wrote a piece in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* entitled 'Thank you, Sigmar Gabriel', stating "your love of Israel, just like mine or that of my friends, is not in question" and endorsing the decision to meet with organisations like *Breaking the Silence* and *B'Tselem* as one that "strengthens the democratic structures" in Israel (Liel 2017).

When Gabriel's predecessor and now President of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Israel a month later, he also used the friendship frame to both calm the waters and reiterate the German government's position (SZ 2017c). Instead of meeting with non-governmental organizations, Steinmeier spoke with prominent intellectuals known as critical voices within Israel, David Grossman and Amos Oz, and he openly expressed his disagreement with Netanyahu's cancellation of the meeting with Gabriel. His skill to embed this critique in an emphasis on German-Israeli friendship was at full display in a speech he gave to students at Hebrew University on 11 May 2017 (Spiegel 2017). Steinmeier began the speech by noting the "miracle of German-Israeli friendship" and then spoke extensively about the importance of democratic

principles. Recalling the long and difficult path both Israel and Germany had travelled to establish themselves as democracies, he reminded his audience that democracy is a fragile achievement that is “never completed” and needs to be protected. He applauded “the spirit of dissent [*Widerspruchsgeist*] and the passion for the democratic dispute” as the “vital core of Israeli democracy”. And then, claiming that in Jewish culture one likes to argue with friends and family more than with anyone else, Steinmeier pleaded “this is exactly how, namely as friends, we Germans want to participate in the argument!”. In this spirit, he encouraged his audience to “let us talk about the challenges to democracy honestly and without prohibition of speech [*Sprachverbote*]”, to address the issue of occupation and the disagreements between the two governments regarding settlements and the two state-solution. Thus, Steinmeier made the double-move of reminding his audience that open debate and criticism among friends is necessary and normal, especially when they claim to be democrats (Steinmeier 2017).

Conclusion

This chapter sought to demonstrate that the concept of ‘friendship’ matters in international relations, specifically German-Israeli relations. It might have been more intuitive to show how the concept is used to justify and guide practices of cooperation. However, tracing the use of friendship language in the context of criticism reveals an intriguing connection between solidarity/loyalty and critique and, thus, directs attention to critique as a *Freundschaftsdienst*. It shows the wide field in which the friendship concept performs in political discourse and highlights the need for more careful empirical and theoretical work on when and how critique and solidarity go hand in hand – and under what conditions tensions exists between them. Furthermore, because the historical context within which German-Israeli relations are situated makes acts of criticism particularly sensitive, the friendship frame takes on extra significance.

The discussion showed that the concept of friendship was employed by German intellectuals, political leaders and media outlets on various occasion to legitimize their criticism of Israeli policies/practices, *as well as* by actors in civil society and the media to call on the German government to be more vocal in its criticism. Specifically, the empirical discussion revealed three patterns: First, and most

importantly, the friendship frame was used to *enable* German disagreement with and critique of Israeli policies and practices. Second, it was used by speakers and others to *defend* their critical statements against accusations of anti-Semitism. Third, and slightly different, it was used to *demand* clear criticism as a duty from which friends should not shy away from. As noted, the study assumes that in each of these instances the concept was employed deliberately, because the speakers were deeply aware that words matter. Did they mobilize the concept for instrumental reasons, that is, for the purpose of making critique safe, or was it a concern for Israel, for a friend, that prompted criticism of Israeli policies and practices? The answer probably varies from case to case, but is likely to always be a bit of both.

While the analysis did not systematically assess whether or to what extent Israeli audiences accepted the critique and the friendship frame through which it was delivered, it did indicate that reactions varied. A more careful assessment of this variation and a substantive discussion on what explains it were beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it points to three central questions that future research may want to tackle: first, how is the concept understood in each context? What does friendship mean to the speaker who uses the term, and what connotation does it have for the audience? Second, even if they agree on the meaning, what makes the use of the friendship frame credible, or persuasive? Third, when it is accepted that a political actor is speaking from the position of a friend, is this position limited to the individual or understood to represent a broader political collective? One aspect shining through the cases analyzed in this chapter but not further explored is the importance of the biography of the German speaker and their ability to create a personal connection to the Jewish experience and to Israel. Such a biographical connection establishes a sense of ‘closeness’ and signals empathy, which is strongly associated with the concept of friendship. It thus may be fruitful to take a closer look at the biographical narratives of the speakers, as perceived by the audience, and their effort to make a connection, as well as instances where that fails. The case of Günter Grass is indicative in this regard, as amongst the examples analyzed in this paper his mobilization of the friendship frame was arguably least successful.

The chapter also pointed to instances when Israelis used the concept of friendship to accept critique from particular German speakers and/or defend them from accusations

of anti-Semitism. Statements such as by Israeli President Rivlin, who in an interview to German television in 2015 noted that both states “can accept, as friends, that we do not always share an opinion” (Spiegel 2015b) are not uncommon. However, critique among friends involves more than allowing the other side to voice their opinion; it is also about taking criticism seriously and ‘on board’. Rather than an isolated act, it is an interactive process in which A not only shares its concern but also tries to make B understand it and change course. Conversely, B may convince A that its concern is groundless. In either case, critique among friends is part of a conversation, involving reflection and productive engagement – it is a process of mutual learning. So if we are wondering whether a friendship has developed between Germany and Israel, we may want to trace this process and assess whether and how such learning is taking place.

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