

Is It Friendship? An Analysis of Contemporary German–Israeli Relations

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This article explores the nature of the contemporary “special relationship” between Germany and Israel. Having emerged out of the ashes of the Second World War and the Holocaust, political relations between these two states are widely seen as having successfully undergone a process of reconciliation. A key feature is German support for Israel, usually understood as a constant attempt to pay off a historical debt in exchange for rehabilitation and recognition of Germany as a “good state.” The article probes another interpretation by asking whether contemporary German–Israeli relations have reached the stage of friendship, a relationship structured by care rather than guilt. To this end, it presents an original conceptual framework of interstate friendship as a bond of shared memories and visions that enable a common orientation toward the past and the future both sides are committed to invest in. Applied to an interpretive analysis of the “sharedness” of the memory of the Holocaust and the vision of a secure Israel, the paper finds strong evidence for the former yet significant gaps in the latter, concluding that relations between the states of Germany and Israel still fall short of friendship.

En este artículo, exploramos la naturaleza de la “relación especial” contemporánea entre Alemania e Israel. Al haber surgido de entre las cenizas de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y el Holocausto, se considera ampliamente que las relaciones políticas entre ambos estados han pasado por un proceso exitoso de reconciliación. Un factor clave es el respaldo de Alemania hacia Israel, lo que se entiende comúnmente como un intento constante de pagar una deuda histórica a cambio de la rehabilitación y el reconocimiento de Alemania como un “estado bueno.” En este artículo, se investiga otra interpretación al preguntarnos si las relaciones contemporáneas entre Alemania e Israel han llegado a la fase de amistad: una relación estructurada por el cuidado en lugar de la culpa. Para este fin, se presenta un marco de trabajo conceptual original de la amistad entre estados como un vínculo de memorias y visiones compartidas que permiten una orientación común hacia el pasado y ese futuro que ambas partes se comprometen a fomentar. Aplicado al análisis interpretativo de lo que es “compartido” en la memoria del Holocausto y la visión de un Israel seguro, en este ensayo, se encuentra una fuerte evidencia de lo primero, pero brechas importantes en lo segundo, y se concluye que las relaciones entre los estados de Alemania e Israel no logran llegar a la categoría completa de amistad.

Cet article explore la nature de la « relation spéciale » contemporaine entre Allemagne et Israël. Émergeant des cendres de la Seconde Guerre mondiale et de l'Holocauste, les relations politiques entre ces deux États sont largement considérées comme étant passées par une réussite du processus de réconciliation. L'une des principales caractéristiques de ces relations est le soutien de l'Allemagne à Israël, qui est généralement compris comme une tentative constante de payer une dette historique en échange de sa réhabilitation et de sa reconnaissance en tant que « bon État ». L'article explore une autre interprétation en se demandant si les relations germano-israéliennes contemporaines ont atteint le stade de l'amitié, une relation structurée par l'attachement plutôt que par la culpabilité. À cette fin, il présente un cadre conceptuel original de l'amitié inter-étatique en tant que lien de visions et de mémoires partagées permettant une orientation commune vers le passé et l'avenir dans laquelle les deux parties s'engagent à s'investir. En appliquant cela à une analyse interprétative de « l'effectivité du partage » de la mémoire de l'Holocauste et de la vision d'une Israël sécurisée, cet article trouve de solides preuves de « l'effectivité du partage » dans le premier cas mais des lacunes significatives dans le deuxième et conclut que les relations entre Allemagne et Israël n'en sont pas encore au stade de l'amitié.

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Introduction

“Germany’s commitment is to Israel, not to a specific Israel” (Israeli diplomat)

“Views about how to best ensure Israel’s future are also formed in Berlin” (German diplomat)

The relationship between Germany¹ and Israel has evolved in remarkable ways. The two states emerged out of the ashes of the Second World War inexorably bound together by the Holocaust, the genocide committed by the people of one state (Germany) against the nation/people of the other (Israel). Following a period of informal and careful buildup of contacts, diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic and Israel were established in 1965. Since then, relations are widely considered to have undergone a successful process of rapprochement and reconciliation (Weingardt 2002; Gardner-Feldman 2012). One key feature of this relationship is the military, financial, and diplomatic support Israel receives from Berlin, encapsulated in the government’s view that Germany has a special responsibility for Israel’s security (Merkel 2008). Learned observers usually attribute this commitment to an ongoing attempt by German governments to pay off a historical debt, to compensate victims of the Holocaust and protect the state representing them in exchange for rehabilitation and recognition of Germany as a “good” state (Segev 1993). Some see this motivated by the strategic attempt of the German government to “whitewash” its Nazi past (Marwecki 2020); others emphasize the sense of guilt and moral obligation as driving a commitment to reconciliation (Gardner Feldman 1984, 2012). Both angles show us an arrangement that provides Germany with ontological security and the Israeli government knows to use to its advantage (Oppermann and Hansel 2019). While persuasive, such accounts operate with the underlying assumption that, rapprochement notwithstanding, the strategic and moral considerations underpinning the relationship have remained constant on both sides. Crudely put, they suggest that German–Israeli relations continue to be structured by the political logic of the 1952 Luxemburg agreement, when the German government committed to reparations.

This reading limits the scope for capturing change in the relationship, in particular the possibility that they may have formed a friendship. Yet, if we take rhetoric as an indicator, this possibility must be taken seriously. Over the last two decades, diplomats and commentators on both sides have described contemporary relations between the two states as very close, and it has become common for German and Israeli government officials to celebrate relations between the two states in terms of friendship. In her first speech in the Knesset in 2008, German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that Germany “will always be a partner and a true friend [of Israel].” Israeli President Shimon Peres, during his speech in the Bundestag in 2010, reciprocated by noting that relations had developed into a “unique friendship.” When Merkel and her cabinet visited Israel in 2014, the public rhetoric and symbolism were geared toward demonstrating the “very strong” (Merkel) and “very, very good” (Netanyahu) friendship that allegedly exists between Germany and Israel. External observers seem to agree, with the *Economist* (2008) declaring Germany as Israel’s “second best friend” and one eminent scholar of the reconciliation process noting “the two countries are friends” (Gardner Feldman 2014).

Prompted by this progressive language, the article explores whether the contemporary relationship between the

states of Germany and Israel can be meaningfully called a friendship. Existing literature does not offer a substantive answer to this question. We can find detailed historical descriptions of how relations were established and have evolved (Deutschkron 1970; Gardner-Feldman 1984, 2012; Auerbach 1986; Weingardt 2002), insightful recollections and commentaries by former practitioners and observers (Stein 2011, 2018; Bertelsmann 2015; Almog and Almog 2016), and scholarly analyses that carve out the political parameters of contemporary relations (Wittstock 2016; Marwecki 2020), yet none of them consider the friendship angle. A recent study takes a step in this direction when arguing that this “special relationship” is marked by interlocking identities (Oppermann and Hansel 2019), but it remains sketchy when it comes to carving out that dimension. In part, this is because scholars are only beginning to develop the conceptual tools needed for engaging such a question. In this article, we build on a small but growing body of literature in the field of international relations (IR) that takes the concept of friendship seriously (Berenskoetter 2007; Koschut and Oelsner 2014; Roshchin 2017; Nordin and Smith 2018) to advance an original reading of friendship as grounded in a shared being in time. Specifically, we hold that friends are bound together in the past and in the future through shared memories and visions that both sides identify with and commit to invest in.

Probing whether the states of Germany and Israel have formed such a friendship is valuable for three main reasons. First, an analysis of the temporal structure of the relationship improves our understanding of the unique connection between these two states and areas of political agreement and contestation. Highlighting the importance of future visions not only complements past-oriented studies (Wittlinger 2018). It also, second, opens the door for an alternative explanation of Germany’s support for Israel. Rather than seeing it as an attempt to pay off a historical debt anchored in the political logic of rehabilitation, a friendship lens presents it as an act of solidarity based on care that is future-oriented. Third, the case shines light on the hurdles and the possibilities of forming a friendship out of a history marked by extreme violence. We should expect this to be a difficult endeavor, which also makes German–Israeli relations a hard case for demonstrating the analytical value of the friendship framework.

The article analyzes friendship as a phenomenon between two states expressed at the level of government rather than civil society.² It focuses on agreements and disagreements among political actors that formally represent the states of Germany and Israel and execute foreign policy—government leaders, diplomats and heads of state—from the early 1990s to 2018. The majority of this period saw conservative governments in power on both sides and was marked by the leadership of Angela Merkel (since 2005) and Benjamin Netanyahu (since 2009). To discern the content of memories and visions and assess their sharedness, we employed an interpretivist approach to both discursive expressions and material manifestations. Evidence was gathered from official statements (speeches, media sources, interviews, books) and practices by German and Israeli political leaders, interviews with (former) diplomats and close observers, as well as relevant scholarly literature.

Our analysis finds that, seen through our conceptual framework, bilateral relations between Germany and Israel have not reached the stage of friendship. However, it shows

¹In this paper, Germany refers to the Federal Republic.

²For transnational civil society links and their influence on German–Israeli relations, see Gardner Feldman (2012).

the potential for such a relationship and highlights the need to better understand the process of building friendship rather than aiming for a snapshot assessment and a yes/no answer. This is important both on a conceptual level, as the temporal angle offers insights into the evolving intersubjective nature of the bond, and on a practical level, as German–Israeli relations seem to have reached a juncture at a time when new governments are taking power on both sides.

The paper proceeds in four steps. A brief review of the historical development of Israeli–German relations introduces the case and contextualizes the question driving this paper. The second part presents our theoretical framework of international friendship, and the main part applies this framework to evaluate contemporary German–Israeli relations around, in particular, the notion of a secure Israel. The conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses some implications.

Development of Political Relations

The rapprochement between Germany and Israel on the political level can broadly be separated into three phases.³ The first phase lasted from the creation of Israel (1948) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) (1949) to the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1965. It was marked by the onset of compensation payments through the 1952 Luxemburg reparations agreement, in which the FRG committed to send goods worth 3 Billion DM over 12 years to Israel, as well as personal reparations to those who were persecuted by Nazi Germany. Five years later the two sides established military relations leading to secret agreements in 1962 and 1964 and formal diplomatic relations in May 1965. While the agreements were presented as the material payout of a moral debt that Israel was right to extract from Germany, this ethical frame was infused with pragmatic interests tied to state-building efforts on both sides. The Israeli government was in dire need of economic, military, and political support that would enable it to function and be recognized as a “normal” state. This overlapped with German Chancellor Adenauer’s awareness that the international rehabilitation and recognition of the FRG as “another Germany” required accepting responsibility for the Holocaust (Gardner-Feldman 1984, 49–65; Olick and Levy 1997; Marwecki 2020). The establishment of diplomatic relations opened the second phase, which was marked by attempts to define the delicate relationship. Whereas German governments aimed at normalizing relations while acknowledging their “special character” (Gardner-Feldman 1984, 163–89), in Israel the view was that Germany had an enduring moral responsibility to support Israel, especially now that relations were formalized (Lavy 1996). Thus, Israel disapproved of Germany’s “neutral” position in the Israeli–Arab conflict, where Bonn tried to juggle the German commitment to Israel with its interest to maintain positive relations with Arab states. Political relations reached a low in 1980, yet intelligence cooperation and Germany’s military support to Israel continued in secret (Shapiro 2002).

German unification in 1990 marked the onset of the third phase, which has been characterized by close cooperation. Israeli doubts of whether a unified Germany would sustain its commitment to Israel faded when, in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, Germany moved its military support

onto a new level.⁴ Since then, the government in Bonn, and later Berlin, openly provided Israel with large military equipment, especially submarines heavily subsidized by the German state,⁵ and began to lease drones from Israel.⁶ Outside the public eye, cooperation in the realms of military training and intelligence is persistently described as close. Berlin continued to give financial support to Israel in the form of development aid and through funds compensating victims of the Holocaust.⁷ German governments also supported Israel in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) by making public statements of solidarity, refraining from taking a critical stand toward Israel, or making an effort in mediating between Israel and its critics behind the scenes (Interviews).⁸ Regular visits by heads of state and government officials further improved the atmosphere, including through well-received speeches, and since 2008 the two governments held seven joint cabinet meetings, a practice Germany and Israel have only with a few selected states. This intensified diplomatic interaction was accompanied by a significant increase in friendship rhetoric, with political leaders on both sides calling the positive development of relations a “miracle” and publicly emphasizing the “friendship” between the two states at every formal encounter, peaking in 2015 during celebrations of 50 years of diplomatic relations.⁹

Conceptual Framework

To assess whether this trajectory and associated practices mean that Germany and Israel have now formed a friendship,¹⁰ a conceptual account of such a relationship at the end of a reconciliation process is needed. Scholarship on conflict resolution and reconciliation has long explored how a relationship between perpetrator and victim can be transformed in positive ways. A common view is that this requires, above all, a change in identities of the parties involved (Kupchan 2010, 50ff) leading to a relationship

⁴ Revelations that German firms supplied technological knowledge to the production of Iraqi weapons directed at Israel caused an outcry and prompted the German government to react with a public commitment to supply Israel with \$670 Million worth of military aid (NYT 1991).

⁵ In the 1990s, three dolphin class submarines were delivered to Israel, of which 2.5 were subsidized. Another two submarines were supplied in the following decade, with a third currently under construction and Germany subsidizing a third of the costs for those three. In 2003 and 2015, Germany provided Israel with anti-missile Patriot missiles batteries and other equipment. In May 2015, Israel agreed to purchase four navy corvettes for €430 Million, supported by the German government with about 120 Million and ThyssenKrupp agreeing to purchase assets in Israel worth 160 Million. In 2017, Israel and Germany signed a MOU providing Israel with three further submarines, again with costs reduced by a third, amounting to circa €1.5 Billion (and another third covered by Germany paying Israeli firms to equip the submarines). At the time of writing, the deal was under corruption investigation in Israel and yet to go ahead.

⁶ Since 2010, the German Department of Defense has leased three Heron drones from Israel for an undisclosed sum, and in 2016 decided to lease three to five new drones in a deal reported to cost around 1 billion Euro (Haaretz 2016).

⁷ Until the mid-1990s, Germany gave development aid to Israel of 140 Million DM annually. After Israel could no longer claim the status of a developing country, funds flowed through other channels (Gardner-Feldman 2012, 170). See also https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/israel-node-/203806#content_4, accessed July 2019.

⁸ One German diplomat explained the practice as trying both “to persuade Israel not to boycott meetings (such as the UN Human Rights Council)” and “to modify texts Israel finds unfair by bringing in a more factual tone and focus on areas of agreement”. These reformulations “require effort and tiresome negotiations...we always try” (Interview 6).

⁹ For an overview of events and discourse surrounding the jubilee, see <http://archived.wixsite.com/de50il-eng>.

¹⁰ This paper uses the terms “international friendship” and “friendship” to refer to relations between states.

³ For a similar periodization, see Gardner-Feldman (2012).

characterized by a “positive interdependence” of their identities (Kelman 2004, 120). Often, the label used to describe this new kind of relationship is friendship.¹¹ Yet, analyses of and prescriptions for turning “enemies into friends” (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004; Kupchan 2010; Gardner Feldman 2012) usually focus on different steps of the process with the ideal outcome, friendship, receiving little attention. That is not surprising, as the slow and arduous nature of reconciliation directs analytical energy to the different phases of how the parties involved deal with the experience of violence through truth-telling, acknowledging the harm caused, engaging in acts of compensation/reparation and other forms of restorative justice, as well as apologizing (to the victim) and forgiving (the perpetrator).¹² An ontology of friendship emerging out of reconciliation cannot be entirely disconnected from this process, but it requires a dedicated conceptual effort if the label is to be meaningful.

Until recently, the field of IR did not offer much in this regard. Scholars have long been satisfied with a rather loose conception of friendship subsumed under the notion of “security community” (Adler and Barnett 1998) or “union” (Kupchan 2010), whose main feature is the expectation of peaceful relations among members. Alexander Wendt (1999, 299) also points to the “rule of mutual aid,” effectively a commitment to solidarity, as a unique aspect of such relationships. While these accounts offer useful pointers, their conception of friendship as a relationship of “stable peace” based on “cultural affinity”—an unspecified conglomeration of ideas, norms, narratives, and ethnicity—is both too limited and too vague. Friendship encompasses more than peaceful relations, and we need a more precise grasp of the cultural parameters binding friends together. Since Wendt (1999, 298) called on IR scholars to “begin thinking systematically about the nature and consequences of friendship in international politics,” there have been a number of efforts to understand and explore the phenomenon in more substantive and targeted ways.¹³ Simon Koschut and Andrea Oelsner distinguish between a “thin” version of strategic friendship, where actors call each other friends because it is politically convenient and where their cooperation is based on shared or complementary interests, and a “thick” version of normative friendship based on “ideational and emotional bonds that permit mutual identification and trust” rather than strategic calculus (Koschut and Oelsner 2014, 14) and intimate rather than universal in scope. Although, as Aristotle already noted, friendship often combines instrumental and moral elements, this distinction is useful because it directs attention to the second dimension and requires us to consider more carefully what friends care about. Thus, we need to conceptualize this deeper layer.

One could approach this task by focusing on whether and how two sides recognize each other in the role of a friend. It would require an elaboration and analysis of this role, how it is formed and understood by the actors, and the practices attached to it.¹⁴ This article takes a different approach by focusing on the ideational ontology of the friendship bond. Building on Berenskoetter (2007), it treats friendship as an intimate, intersubjective relationship built on and held together by shared identifications, or elements that both sides

identify with and feel deeply attached to. These elements are shared because they reach into how each side conceives of its identity internally, creating that positive interdependence noted by Kelman. In other words, they form a bond. Importantly, this bond is not a chain hooked into pre-existing attributes, or properties, the actors possess in common, but is something formed and maintained “in-between” them (Kahane 1999, 270). Employing a process-relational angle, this means, first, that friends care not simply about the other *per se* but about that which is established in between them, what connects them in the “inter.” Second, the bond is not created spontaneously but formed gradually; its constitutive elements formulated together in constructive dialogue and affirmed in practice. Let us look at these aspects more carefully.

Adopting the view that collective identity is based on shared meanings, this paper advances the reading of a friendship bond formed around a shared understanding of being in the world, more specifically a shared sense of being in time. The notion of friendship grounded in a shared temporality draws on a phenomenological reading in which subjects obtain a sense of self by developing a meaningful understanding of their (collective) existence in social space and time. This understanding is expressed in a biographical narrative that subjects, including political communities, identify with. States can be seen as creators and carriers of such “national biographies” (Berenskoetter 2014a). Extended to interstate relations, this ontology provides a reading of friendship formed out of overlapping biographical narratives: an existential bond grounded in the formulation of, and identification with, a shared history and shared visions of the future to which both parties are cognitively and emotionally attached. The “shared” quality means that both sides are part of, and see each other within, pasts and futures central to their respective national biographies.

Specifically, friends draw on significant experiences that generate a shared stock of memories enabling them to meet and situate themselves together in an experienced space.¹⁵ Such experiences can be positive or negative and, as such, include traumatic violence. While two parties rarely make the exact same experience, it is possible to establish a shared memory that both sides identify with. For this to occur, both sides need to be involved in the formulation of the memory, its meaning content, and agree on its importance. Agreement on facts is not enough; friends must also use the memory as a historical reference in their respective national biographies and relate to it in similar or compatible ways. First, in terms of *perspective*: friends approach and engage the memory from a shared point of view. Second, in terms of *distance*: friends agree on how close the experience is and, thus, on the presence of the shared memory in everyday life. Third, in terms of *lessons*: friends agree on what to learn from the shared experience and formulate lessons, often norms meant to guide future action. The memory thus feeds into and is intertwined with the formulation of a shared future, reflected in John Paul Lederach’s point that reconciliation requires not only finding a shared space in the past, but also creating an opportunity “to look forward and envision [a] shared future ... where people and things come together” (Lederach 1997, 26–27).

Grounded in the insight that humans master the unknown future through visions that delineate meaningful possibilities of being in the world (Berenskoetter 2011), we

¹¹ This is not to imply that all reconciliation processes are geared toward or will end in friendship.

¹² For overviews, see Bar-Siman Tov (2004); Gardner Feldman (2012). On forgiveness, see Löwenheim (2009).

¹³ For overviews, see Koschut and Oelsner (2014) and Nordin and Smith (2018). See also Wendt (1999), Digeser (2016), and Roshchin (2017).

¹⁴ See Berenskoetter and van Hoef (2017) and Haugevik (2018).

¹⁵ Memories often are formulated on the collective level and represent a meaningful past in what Maurice Halbwachs (1992) called “social frameworks of memory,” thereby constituting “mnemonic communities” (Zerubavel 2003).

contend that friendship is to a significant degree a forward-looking relationship. Friends share future visions they each identify and draw creative energy from. In the first instance, this takes the form of a shared utopia, a conception of (international) order they consider desirable and in which they both have a place, which motivates them to work together and invest in its realization. They may also share dystopias, or visions of disorder or undesirable orders, commonly expressed in threat scenarios. While dystopias tend to be logically juxtaposed to the shared utopia, friends may differ with regard to its intensity or plausibility. That is to say, friends do not need to feel the same threat as long as they share a positive vision and have empathy for each other's fears and, thus, exercise "epistemic partiality" (Stroud 2006).

Together, these biographical markers connect friends through a deep, intersubjective layer of meaning that establishes trust through a sense of collective being in time, a shared biography. It is this intersubjective space friends care about, and through which they care about each other. By weaving friends together existentially in a shared sense of being in time—where they come from and where they are going—the bond blurs the distinction between inside and outside, between the domestic and the foreign. In that sense, friendship legitimizes intervention and entails a sharing of sovereignty.¹⁶ It is also where friends anchor their commitment to solidarity, broadly understood as standing by someone's side and lending support in times of need.

If this sounds overly romantic, it should be clear that friendship is a political relationship and, as such, involves politics. Three aspects are important in this regard. First, the focus in this article is on how shared meanings are articulated and carried at the level of government. Having authority to represent a collective sense of being in time does not imply that governments have autonomy in formulating memories and visions. For their accounts to be considered legitimate and sustainable, they must have sufficient domestic support. Acknowledging that memories and visions are contested within society, the assumption here is that governments represent the reading that resonates with the constituency keeping them in power. Second, governments agree on shared meanings in a dialogue with the friend, and in this dialogue state representatives regard each other as equals, even if their relationship is characterized by asymmetries in terms of material assets, knowledge, or moral capital. Recognition of the other as an equal involves listening, the willingness to compromise to find common ground, and the openness to learn that harbors much of the creative potential of friendship.¹⁷ Third, like all ideas, memories and visions become tangible through acts—policies and practices—that bring them to life. Friends affirm their attachment and commitment to shared meanings through politically costly investments into their maintenance and realization. At the same time, because these investments are motivated by care about a shared past and future, friends trust that each side is contributing as much as they are able to. Their contributions do not follow a "tit-for-tat" logic and are not recorded on a balance sheet, but are a form of social exchange marked by a unique logic of reciprocity. Thus, there is no debt in the utilitarian sense among friends, and acts of solidarity may well appear asymmetrical if one side has greater capabilities than the other (Berenskoetter

2007; Koschut and Oelsner 2014; Pashakhanlou and Berenskoetter 2020).

The framework outlined above enables evaluating whether contemporary relations between Germany and Israel qualify as friendship by analyzing whether they developed a shared understanding of being in time. Specifically, it asks us to assess whether the two governments have formulated and invested in shared pasts and futures that explain German support in terms of care. A friendship cannot be said to exist if we find fundamental and persistent gaps and disagreements over the content of memories or visions and how to invest in them; insufficient commitment and failure to make costly investments and/or when practices are seen as counterproductive and undermining a joint project. These would be visible in recurring political tensions, including expressions of disappointment and frustration. While tensions are not necessarily an indicator of a weak relationship, what matters is whether the gaps and disagreements are engaged in a constructive dialogue with a commitment to find common ground, or whether they are avoided and remain unsolved.

German–Israeli Relations: A Shared Being in Time?

Facing a Shared Past

The German–Israeli relationship is marked by the experience and memory of the Holocaust, the systematic genocide conducted by Nazi Germany of 6 million Jews and other groups during the Second World War. The incorporation of this trauma into respective national biographies coincided with the formal establishment of bilateral relations. Until the 1960s, both societies had muted the Holocaust, which appeared an obstacle to respective nation-building efforts (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 93–95). However, agreements over reparation payments, the Eichmann trial in 1961, and the onset of diplomatic relations required direct confrontation with the genocide and the subsequent reconciliation process empowered and legitimized its memory (Segev 1993, 359; Weingardt 2002). From the 1980s onwards, the Holocaust memory became the central historical reference in the biographical narratives of both states and the most significant overlap between them and the pillar of the bilateral relationship. As Merkel put it in her historic speech in the Knesset in 2008, "Germany and Israel are and remain, forever and in special ways, connected through the memory of the Shoa" (Merkel 2008; also Stein 2011, 21, Interviews 6–12).

The constitution of the Holocaust as a *shared* memory space in which both sides meet was central for the reconciliation process and made possible through three moves: First, German leaders take responsibility for the genocide, both in their function as state representatives and on a personal level, and declare this responsibility "a part of German identity" (Köhler 2005). Such acknowledgments are often accompanied by an expression of shame and with accepting the role of the former perpetrator, recognizing Israel as the political unit representing the Jewish victims. Second, Israel reaffirms German efforts to keep this memory alive, to critically reflect on and atone for the murderous deeds of the Nazi state (Peres 2010). This is followed by, third, the mutual effort to adopt a shared memory of the Holocaust primarily from the perspective of the victims, the Jewish experiences of suffering, not only in Israel but also in Germany.¹⁸ As one German diplomat put it: "We see the victim's perspective

¹⁶ Wolfers (1962, 27ff) already noted that amity entails a sharing of sovereignty [see also Kupchan (2010, 36)].

¹⁷ In the words of Marilyn Friedman "the experiences, projects, and dreams of our friends can frame for us new standpoints from which we can experience the significance and worth of moral values and standards." (Friedman 1993, 197). Berenskoetter (2014b) discusses this as a form of empowerment.

¹⁸ Pointedly expressed in the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in the heart of Berlin.

and give it priority” (Interview 8).¹⁹ The shared memory established an almost transcendental connection between the two states through agreement on historical facts, their inter-subjective evaluation and the recognition of respective roles as perpetrator and victim. Both sides agree that investment in the preservation of this memory is an important and productive area of cooperation at the state and civil society levels (Zimmermann 2002; Interviews 3–10; Asseburg 2005).

However, meeting in this memory space is a source of tension in terms of *distance*, generated by gaps in how both sides relate to the shared memory and the role identities associated with it. In Germany’s national biography, the willingness to “face the past” goes hand in hand with drawing a “line of separation” that “creates a clearly defined distance to this past, which allows to actively process it so as not to repeat it” (Assmann 2016, 33). This separation line, as discussed by Aleida Assmann, is different from drawing a *Schlussstrich* (finishing line), implying closure and leaving the memory behind, which is emphatically rejected by Germany’s political elite (Köhler 2005). Rather, claiming responsibility for the genocide pairs’ reflection about this past with celebrating that “Germany” successfully transformed into a new state that contrasts the one that committed the crime. This move is central to the reconciliation process, as the Israeli government can only positively engage and build ties with a German government that it recognizes as representing *not* Nazi Germany. In that sense, the relationship affirms the separating line for Germany and its distance to the Holocaust (Segev 1993, 173; Jarausch and Geyer 2003, 10–11). Yet, in Israel’s biographical narrative, the memory of the Holocaust is not confined to a distant past. It is omnipresent and deeply embedded as a national trauma that is frequently invoked as a reminder to describe Israel’s condition as a state sheltering its people after experiencing historic cruelty and hostility in the past and always entangled in the experience of victimhood (Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1984; Jaspal and Yampolsky 2011; Stein 2011).²⁰ This presence is routinely impressed on German officials, whether through joint visits to Yad Vashem, Israel’s official memorial to the Holocaust, or through public reminders of Auschwitz as a symbol of “the depth of the abyss of bloodshed ... that will remain open at our feet forever” (Sharon 2005). It also includes, logically and emotionally, the perpetrators. Rather than confining them to the past, the memory constitutes the perpetrator as a figure in the here and now and possibly in the future (see below).

These two different ways of relating to the shared memory constitute what Michael Wolffsohn (1988, 91–95) calls “*Ungleichzeitigkeit*,” literally “non-contemporaneity” or “not (being in) the same time.” It is a source of tension that structures the relationship politically. On the one hand, meeting in the memory space through the victim’s perspective gives Israel the authority to claim ownership of the memory. It (re)connects Germany to its historical role of the perpetrator and (re)constitutes Germany’s guilt and, hence, moral debt vis-à-vis Israel, and with it raising behavioral expectations of atonement. Even if this role is not assigned to contemporary German governments, it requires them to be acute to the perpetrator’s continuing presence. On the other hand, the German confidence of having distanced itself from its Nazi past and transformed into a “new” state opens the door for governments in Berlin to redefine the

relationship as one where bearing responsibility for the Holocaust is not reducible to guilt (Olick 2016; Interview 3, see also Barkan 2001).

The different ways of relating to the memory of the Holocaust are also expressed in the main *lessons* Germany and Israel draw from this memory. Both sides formulate these lessons within a shared commitment to two main maxims: “never forget,” that is, the intent to keep the shared memory alive, and “never again,” namely the intent to prevent the possibility of another Holocaust and, more generally, the responsibility to protect and support Jewish life. Beyond this broad agreement, each state has formulated and embraced a contrasting set of lessons that have become ingrained in their national identities and state practices. In Germany, where the memory of the Holocaust is intertwined with the Second World War, two broad lessons are meant to prevent a “return” to the aggressive past: (1) the conviction that “hypernationalism” and unilateral action are dangerous. Consequently, foreign policy should be conducted through cooperation in multilateral institutions and managed through integration and the sharing of sovereignty. (2) The view that military force is not a desirable foreign policy instrument because of both its violent nature and its inability to solve political problems. Primacy should be placed on diplomacy, trade and development aid, captured in the notion of Germany as a “civilian power” (Maull 1990/91; Berger 1997), compromised only in exceptional circumstances such as to prevent genocide. In Israel, where the memory of the Holocaust serves as a constant warning entangled with its seemingly perpetual security problems, governments have drawn two related lessons embedded in Zionist thought: (1) the conviction that the Jewish people cannot rely on others for protection and, hence, must find refuge in an independent and sovereign state capable of defending itself. (2) The view that military might is central to provide this protection and thus constant military readiness and superiority are essential to ensure the survival of the Jewish people (Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992; Shapira 2007).

Intertwined with how the two states developed in their respective political regions, these distinct lessons further substantiate the *Ungleichzeitigkeit* in relating to the shared memory: a Germany committed to separate itself from its Nazi Past, and an Israel facing the Holocaust as an ever-present possibility. As we will see, this affects attempts of formulating and investing in a shared vision through this memory.

Finding a Shared Future?

This section assesses the presence of shared future visions, constructed on the basis of the shared past, as a central element of a friendship bond. German and Israeli officials routinely note the importance of shared future projects to maintain and further develop close relations. At the heart is a combination of the two aforementioned maxims, to keep alive the memory of the Holocaust (“never forget”) and to prevent the possibility of another Holocaust in the future (“never again”). The question is whether this frame holds a shared vision of being in the future that both sides identify with and invest in.

Perhaps the most obvious commitment to the “never again” maxims is the joint declaration to “fight against all forms of Anti-Semitism and racism” (Merkel and Netanyahu 2016). Firmly anchored in the memory of the Holocaust it places the spotlight on Germany as the former perpetrator. Although German government representatives have frequently denounced Anti-Semitism on the international stage, diplomats acknowledge that insufficient awareness of Anti-Semitism is the one issue Israeli officials have criticized

¹⁹This had not been the case in the German Democratic Republic/East Germany, as Gauck (2015a) points out. For critical analyses, see Wittlinger (2018) and Marwecki (2020).

²⁰In a 2009 survey, 98.1 percent of the respondents of the Jewish–Israeli adult population stated that remembering the Holocaust is a guiding principle in their life (Arian and Keissar-Sugarmen 2012; see also Bertelsmann 2015).

Germany for (Interview 5, 12).²¹ Over the last decade, the government reinforced its commitment by investing in the state's recognition of the problem and its capacity to fight Anti-Semitism domestically, declaring it a part of Germany's *raison of the state* (BMI 2013; BMI 2018; also Bundestag 2011; Spiegel 2012a). While welcomed in Israel as an affirmation of the "never again" principle, this investment does not necessarily support a shared vision of a world in which Anti-Semitism has no place due to differences of whether and where this world is possible. In Berlin, fighting Anti-Semitism is linked to a vision of a German state that is safe for Jews to live in, making this a core indicator of the state Germany wants to be. As President Steinmeier put it "only when Jews are fully at home in Germany is this republic fully at itself" (Steinmeier 2017b; see also Westerwelle 2012; Merkel 2018; Interviews). Yet this stands in tension with a prominent element in the biographical narrative of the state of Israel, namely the traditional Zionist view that Anti-Semitism is ingrained in Europe and that thinking otherwise is a dangerous illusion (Laqueur 2003). Correspondingly, Israel is seen as the solution to centuries of diaspora and persecution and as the only place where Jewish people can control and secure their future, pointedly expressed in the vision "of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate ... in their own sovereign state" (Declaration of Independence; see also Netanyahu 2000; Laqueur 2003; Klar, Eyal-Schori, and Klar 2013; Almog and Klar 2016).

The tension is trumped by the joint commitment to a secure Israel, more precisely, to the vision of Israel as a state that provides a safe place for Jews to live. While a core responsibility of any Israeli government, German governments also support this vision as part of their responsibility derived from the Holocaust. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Yad Vashem, Chancellor Schröder stressed Germany's responsibility to resolutely espouse the existence of the state of Israel in secure borders" as a "basic pillar of our foreign policy" (DW 2004). In a speech to the UN General Assembly in 2005 commemorating the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, Foreign Minister Fischer noted "the state of Israel's right to exist and the security of its citizens will always remain the non-negotiable basic position of German foreign policy" (Fischer 2005a). And Merkel in her 2008 Knesset speech declared Germany's "special historical responsibility" for Israel's security as "part of my country's *raison d'état*" (Merkel 2008). Such expressions of care for Israel are underlined by promises that "Israel will always get [from Germany] what it needs to uphold its security" (Schröder 2002) and that such assurances "cannot remain empty words" (Merkel 2008; see also Bundestag 2018). Yet, while the notion of a secure Israel is recognized by both states as a shared vision, what exactly it means for Israel to be secure and how to best provide this security "are not abstract questions but politically concrete and at the heart of the matter" (Interview 5). They are questions about the nature of the referent object to be secured, about Israel's identity. Disagreements over its concrete expression and how to invest in it emerge in the associated visions of Israel as a military power, Israel at peace, and Israel as a democracy.

ISRAEL AS A MILITARY POWER

At the forefront is the shared vision of Israel as a protected physical space, above all the commitment to the territorial integrity of the state of Israel and the safety of its citizens

from external attack. In Israel, this vision is expressed in the idea of a self-reliant, strong nation ready to fight to protect itself, manifested in a large defense budget, compulsory military/national service and the Israeli fighter ethos. The German government invests in this vision through the military support outlined earlier, described by political practitioners and observers alike as the most significant sign of solidarity (Interviews 1, 2, 7, 10; Zeit 2017). Informally, the military deals are justified (on the German side) and appreciated (on the Israeli side) with reference to the shared biographical narrative, specifically the moral obligation stemming from German responsibility for the Holocaust. Reacting to the announcement in 2006 that Germany was subsidizing two more submarines, an editorial in the *Jerusalem Post* (2006) noted "while their grandparents' generation perpetrated the Holocaust ... the current generation is helping prevent a second Holocaust by providing the IDF with some of the most important defensive weapon systems in its arsenal. As far as corrective steps go, that's a huge one." In a discussion with German students in 2015, Merkel explained the provision of four navy vessels to Israel by arguing "Germany must support Israel especially" because "Nazi Germany has killed six Million Jews ... out of that responsibility we are doing this" (Welt 2015). However, these historical justifications are rarely found in the official discourse, which is careful to avoid the notion of debt. The Israeli side tends to refer to a "deep strategic partnership" (Ynet 2017), whereas the German government translates its historical responsibility for past atrocities into empathy for Israel's contemporary situation, specifically its sense of vulnerability due to its small size, location, and a history of attacks from its neighbors. Importantly, German officials publicly affirmed the two main threats that Israeli leaders, above all Netanyahu, repeatedly and forcefully communicated to them²²: the possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons and terrorist attacks from the military wings of the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah.²³ Accepting the dystopias embedded in these threat images, German officials have acknowledged Israel's "need for a position of military superiority" (Fischer 2005b; Zeit 2006).

The German investment in the vision of Israel as a military power faces frequent domestic criticism and carries both financial and political costs. Apart from the significant subsidies, which no other country receives, the military deals violate Germany's foreign policy norm prohibiting arms exports into conflict zones and compromise its self-image as a civilian power. Thus, Berlin supports the vision of Israel as a military power only as long as the primary aim is deterrence, adamant that military assets supplied by Germany will be used only for defensive purposes and not for offensive operations. As one senior diplomat put it "the submarines are signs for guaranteeing Israel's existence; they are only for deterring an external military threat. They cannot be deployed on the Temple Mount. It would be disastrous if we were to support military used in the occupation" (interview 10).²⁴ The Israeli side can accommodate this position; however, disagreements arise when Germany

²² See Netanyahu and von der Leyen (2015); Netanyahu and Steinmeier (2015); DF (2016); Netanyahu (2018). The two threats were vividly displayed on the website of the Israeli embassy in Germany.

²³ On Iran, see Merkel (2008), Westerwelle (2012), Gauck (2012), and Gabriel (2018). Together with the EU, Germany categorized Hamas as a terrorist organization and does not recognize it as the legitimate government in Gaza. In her reaction to the election victory of Hamas in 2006, Merkel adopted the official line of the Israeli government almost to the word (Asseburg and Busse 2011, 703).

²⁴ In 2002, Berlin declined an informal Israeli request for armored transport vehicles ('Fuchs tank') for that reason.

²¹ As one Israeli expert noted, "Germany has put much efforts in the memory of the Holocaust, but is much less active in fighting day-to-day Anti-Semitism" (Interview 4).

attempts to insert civilian power principles into the vision of a secure Israel more generally (Interview 2). Unease in Berlin over Israel's use of military force during interventions in Gaza and Lebanon was publicly muted with references to "Israel's right to defend itself." Yet, when in 2012 the Israeli government played with the idea of a pre-emptive military strike on Iranian installations, German officials voiced their opposition to such an action and emphasized a diplomatic solution. This outlook produced sharp disagreements regarding the wisdom of conducting negotiations with Iran and the successive nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), agreed in July 2015 (*Times of Israel* 2018). Netanyahu compared the deal to the 1938 Munich agreement, using the analogy to accuse supporters, including Germany, to appease Iran (Netanyahu 2018). Merkel in turn kept assuring Israeli audiences that she shares Israeli fear but noted disagreement on how to address it, stressing that Germany's commitment to Israel's security cannot be reduced to the military aspect but "must be understood in a very comprehensive way" (*Ynet* 2015b; *Channel 10*, 2018). This spills over into what it means for Israel to exist in peace.

ISRAEL AT PEACE

Frictions over how to best invest in the vision of a secure Israel and to what extent the Israeli government is willing to grant Germany a voice in this matter resurface in the vision of Israel at peace. The main gap between Israel and Germany concerns the notion of "peaceful coexistence" between the state of Israel and the Palestinian people. The Zionist vision of Israel at peace is largely based on Theodor Herzl's (1902) portrayal of an "exemplary society." Yet, throughout the years and given the ever-existing security concerns, border disputes and the protracted conflict with the Palestinians, the Israeli government reduced the vision of Israel at peace to a function of investing in a secure Israel. This was expressed after the failure of the Camp David talks and the inception of the second Intifada (2000), in Sharon's "security first" doctrine and Netanyahu's stance that "peace must be based on security if it is to last" (Netanyahu 2000, xv; see also Netanyahu 2018). In his words, "for the foreseeable future the only kind of peace that will endure ... between Arab and Jew is the peace of deterrence" (Netanyahu 2000, 336). In this "bleak vision" (Haaretz 2018), which echoes the image of Israel as a military power, Palestinians are not really taken into account.

The view in Berlin is close to the opposite, namely that security will be the consequence of peace, broadly understood as a condition free of violence, and that peaceful relations require the creation of a viable Palestinian state. In her 2008 Knesset speech, Merkel noted Germany's "decisive commitment" to this vision, and almost every speech by German officials regarding Israel contains the mantra that a "two state solution" is necessary for Israel's long-term security. The stance was captured by Foreign Minister Steinmeier (2016): "It is considered almost naïve today to speak of peace, but that is our vision for the future ... a solution with two states, in which Israel and a sovereign and viable Palestine can live in peace and security and recognize each other" (see also *Bundestag* 2018). This commitment is not shared in Jerusalem. Although Netanyahu vaguely supported the "two state" idea in a speech at Bar Ilan University in 2009, his government did not reiterate or invest in this vision, with some ministers rejecting it explicitly. Prior to his visit to Germany in 2015, President Rivlin in an interview with *Süddeutsche Zeitung* also opposed the idea (*SZ* 2015). Netanyahu floated the vision of a "state minus," a self-governed

Palestinian entity that remains under the security control of Israel (CNN 2018) and some analysts suggest he "has done more than anyone else in the last quarter-century to prevent a Palestinian state from becoming a reality" (Pfeffer 2019). In Berlin, the impression had taken hold that the Israeli government discarded a "two state" vision in favor of the "status quo" (Asseburg and Busse 2011; Spiegel 2016; Interviews 6–12). As outlined below, this divergence of visions provides little space for constructive dialogue regarding the vision of Israel at peace and how to get there, making it harder for the German government to justify support. As Foreign Minister Gabriel noted in a speech at Tel Aviv's Institute for National Security Studies, the Israeli government's disregard for a two-state solution renders it "increasingly difficult for people like me to explain to [the German public] the reasons why our support for Israel must persist" (Gabriel 2018).

The gap is exposed when it comes to envisioning the territorial shape of "two states" and the location of borders. Whereas in Israel the desired shape of the homeland lacks clarity and is contested by various political factions, German officials tie their vision of Israel at peace to an existence within "recognized international borders" (Köhler 2005), namely the borders prior to the 6-day war in 1967. Expressed herein is the view that Israeli occupation of territory beyond the 1967 borders is illegitimate and detrimental to the two-state vision of Israel at peace. Correspondingly, investments are not recognized as contributing to a shared project. For instance, under German leadership, the EU officially adopted the "two state solution" (Berlin Declaration 1999),²⁵ and a peace plan developed by Foreign Minister Fischer based on this vision was taken up by the EU and turned into the Middle East Quartet Road Map, subsequently led by the United States (Müller 2011, 396). This initiative was largely ignored by the Israeli government (Elgindy 2012), which in turn looked with suspicion at German and EU development aid to the Palestinian territories. And when the Israeli government invested in a security wall/fence between Israel and the occupied territories in the West Bank, the German government, while recognizing the security rationale, considered it an obstacle to peaceful relations and openly criticized the route because it ventured beyond the 1967 borders (Interviews 6–11).

Israeli investment in settlements presents the greatest area of contention. Whereas the Israeli government gradually allowed the expansion of settlements, the view in Berlin is that these obstruct the peace process and threaten the foundation of the two-state solution. German politicians, departing from the habit to voice disagreements only behind closed doors, began to publicly criticize Israeli practices and in 2011 voted in favor of a Palestinian proposal at the UN condemning Israeli settlements in the West Bank. At a joint press conference with Netanyahu in Berlin in 2012, Merkel pointedly stated that "we agree to disagree" on the matter (Haaretz 2012), and after the Israeli parliament passed a law legalizing a large number of controversial settlements she cancelled the joint cabinet meeting planned for May 2017 in Jerusalem (Zeit 2017; Interviews 10, 11). Observers reported the German chancellor's increasing frustration, disappointment, and anger about what she considered Netanyahu's insufficient investment toward peace. Despite regular meetings and conversations—according to diplomats Netanyahu called Merkel quite often—she reportedly found it difficult to speak to the prime minister as "he

²⁵ The EU's commitment to the creation and recognition of a Palestinian state was reiterated in 2007 (*EU Action Strategy* 2007). For the official EU position on the Middle East conflict, see *EEAS* (2016).

does not listen” (Haaretz 2011; Spiegel 2012b, 33). In turn, the Israeli government became frustrated with Berlin’s growing assertiveness and accused the German side of not understanding the Israeli context (Interview 11). Thus, rather than working toward finding common ground, a close observer noted that the two sides are “conducting monologues” and that “there is no chemistry ... no trust” between the two leaders (Interview 13; also Stein 2018). Even where relations on the working level are described as close, one senior German diplomat remarked “the Israeli government does not really care about the German position concerning the Middle East peace process” (Interview 8, also interviews 6, 10; SZ 2019).²⁶

ISRAEL AS A DEMOCRACY

Both Germany and Israel claim the state identity of a democracy, a status they each built up gradually over decades and consider a major achievement providing recognition from and membership in “the West.” In bilateral meetings, officials publicly affirmed each other’s status as democratic states and routinely emphasized its importance for the future of the relationship (Olmert 2006; Gauck 2015b). In her Knesset speech, Merkel called it a “source of trust” (Merkel 2008) and the joint statement from the 2016 intergovernmental consultations declared democracy, paired with freedom, the rule of law and respect for human dignity, the “solid foundation ... for friendship” between Germany and Israel (Merkel and Netanyahu 2016).

The engagement with democracy as a shared future vision faces a number of challenges, however. While democracy is an essentially contested concept, there is a temptation to take the meaning for granted in the relationship, not least by seeing the democratic status of Germany and Israel as achievements rather than aspirations. In Berlin, it is a hallmark of the “new Germany” and understood as not only a political system and process, but also a normative fabric of society that protects against the Fascism that enabled the Holocaust and, as such, part of the “never again” commitment. In the context of rising populism German leaders warned that citizens might be “turning their back on democracy” (Focus 2017; Steinmeier 2017b), yet their commitment to, and the viability of, the vision of the state as a democracy has not been called into question within the relationship. For Israel, the situation is different, as there is a well-known and fundamental dilemma between the vision of Israel as a democracy and of Israel as a Jewish state that holds the occupied territories.²⁷ In line with prominent Jewish and Israeli voices, German officials therefore considered the “two state” vision as the logical safeguard for Israel’s future as a Jewish and democratic state (Westerwelle 2012; Spiegel 2016; Focus 2017; Steinmeier 2017b).²⁸ This logic found little support within the Netanyahu government’s conception of Israel at peace, however.

While German officials affirmed, at least in public, Israel’s self-image as the only democracy in the Middle East, concern was growing in Berlin that the Netanyahu governments’ adoption of more discriminatory policies toward non-Jews threatened to undermine Israel’s democratic character and distance it from a shared ideal (SZ 2018; Interviews 6, 7, 10, 11). Accentuating what Naomi Chazan (2013) has called “dynamics of de-democratization,” the

government supported a series of new laws that appeared to reign in liberal rights and domestic opposition groups critical of the occupation and its practices.²⁹ International criticism of these laws included German voices worrying about democracy as a shared value foundation of the relationship, with the German–Israeli Parliamentary Group in the *Bundestag* writing in protest to Netanyahu that the “transparency” law was “out of line with the function of role model performed by Israel’s democracy” (DW 2015; also DF 2016). Such concerns were rejected by the Israeli Justice Minister and the ambassador in Berlin (DW 2015; DF 2016). In Jerusalem, the German critique of laws intended to secure the Jewish character of the state appeared as an unwarranted intervention. The missing dialogue on this matter was symbolized in an incident during Foreign Minister Gabriel’s visit to Israel for Holocaust Memorial Day in 2017. When Gabriel met the anti-occupation organizations *Breaking the Silence* and *B’Tselem* despite Netanyahu’s late objection, the Israeli prime minister cancelled his planned meeting with Gabriel. The incident was considered an *Eklat* in the German media, with Merkel’s spokesperson noting “we believe that it should be possible, in a democratic country, to meet with critical non-governmental organisations without such consequences” (FAZ 2017; SZ 2017). As one diplomat put it, the incident “pulled away the curtain” (Interview 8), exposing the fragility of democracy as a shared vision and the difficulty of engaging in a constructive dialogue about the matter due to its intertwined nature with the contested vision of Israel at peace, notwithstanding efforts to open such a dialogue (Spiegel 2017; Steinmeier 2017a).

Conclusion

Has a friendship developed between the states of Germany and Israel? That is, using the framework put forward in this article, is there evidence of a shared being in time that both sides care to invest in? Our research shows that the two states share a powerful memory that intertwines their national biographies and out of which they derive a broadly shared commitment of “never again.” The shared memory of the Holocaust, made possible by meeting in the experienced space of the victims, leads both governments to commit to the utopia of a secure Israel, expressed in visions of Israel as a military power and Israel at peace, and to stress democracy as a shared ideal. As such, the potential for a friendship bond exists. However, at closer look, our analysis points to an *Ungleichzeitigkeit* in how the two sides relate to the shared memory, by contrasting it with the present (Germany) or by seeing it as ever-present (Israel). This difference and the lessons formulated through it played out in significant disagreements over the concrete formulation of, and investment in, the vision of a secure Israel. Berlin’s support of Israel as a military power compromises Germany’s self-image as a civilian power, and there are tensions between the two governments regarding the vision of Israel at peace, which spill over into the vision of Israel as a democracy. In those areas, we found little evidence of constructive dialogue, but, rather, complaints and frustrations that were increasingly expressed openly.

While the German government’s embrace of responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people contains a noticeable element of care appreciated on the Israeli side, Berlin’s claim to voice in shaping the meaning of Israel’s security, peace, and democracy appears to conflict with the Zionist

²⁶ Although, diplomats interviewed thought that German concerns were heard and reflected upon in the Israeli media (Interview 7).

²⁷ Lupovici (2012) discusses this as a source of ontological insecurity for Israel.

²⁸ Notably, the German government thus decided to always use the two terms “Jewish” and “democratic” together when referring to the state of Israel (Interviews; *Bundestag* 2018).

²⁹ On the “Transparency Law,” see *Guardian* (2016); on the “Nationality Law,” see *Zeit* (2018). For a background, see Chazan (2013).

determination of “never again being in the situation where others decide over our future” (Stein 2011, 10). Effectively, the shared memory keeps alive historical role identities of perpetrator/victim and mandates a secure Israel as a utopia in which Germany must invest yet the content of which it cannot shape. Up to a point, this is convenient for both sides: the Israeli government benefits from a constellation in which Berlin’s support is grounded in historical debt that cannot be paid off,³⁰ and the German government can continue to contrast the identity of contemporary Germany against the historical *Nazi* state. Yet, this configuration lacks a positive vision in which both sides see and treat each other as equals and, thus, does not constitute a friendship bond.

Officials in Germany and Israel are aware that the memory of the Holocaust won’t be sufficient to hold the two states together, and that a relationship based on past-oriented guilt is less sustainable than one based on future-oriented care. Over the last few years, the governments made an effort to devise a shared vision free of contentious issues and “play on the positive agenda of bilateral cooperation” (Interviews 1 and 6–11) by focusing on areas of science, trade, culture, and youth exchanges. The vision underpinning this move, displayed at the joint cabinet meetings in 2016 and 2018, is that of culturally close and technologically advanced Western states. While this attempt “to create new dialogue on new issues ... more areas of commitment and to break the holocaust–occupation spectrum” (Interview 1) conveys a willingness to place future relations onto new ground, it does not provide the basis for a viable friendship, for two reasons. First, links in trade, research, and innovative technologies are too generic to provide a special bond. They are not tied to a collective memory and a shared utopia that both societies identify with and become emotionally attached to and deeply care about. Second, while helpful in providing collaborative opportunities, they do not solve fundamental disagreements. An uncontested vision of Israel and Germany as “innovation nations” may offer a seemingly neutral space for joint projects, but it cannot block out the tensions or substitute for constructive dialogue over the visions of a secure Israel, Israel at peace, and democracy as a shared ideal. In this regard, it is a strategy of avoidance. Our framework maintains that formulating a shared vision both sides care about and capable of carrying a friendship must go through the shared past. It requires addressing the *Ungleichzeitigkeit* in relating to the memory of the Holocaust and the lessons formulated through it, and adjusting them to enable the formulation of a future in which “people and things come together.” It also requires recognizing how debt limits the possibility of a shared vision and the scope for reciprocity. Rather than constituting expectations for one-sided support, the commitment to a shared future must include each side caring about the future of the other and, therefore, include an Israeli commitment to a shared vision of a secure Germany.³¹

Taking a step back, where does this finding leave the conceptual lens introduced here? One may question the wisdom of presenting a new framework with a case that does not seem to meet the theoretical standard. Yet the friendship lens offered in this article is an (incomplete) ideal type, and the analysis both substantiates important aspects and points to areas where further theoretical development

is needed. To start with, we hope to encourage IR scholars to delve deeper into the conceptualization of friendship as relational and as process. This involves, first and foremost, paying attention to the intersubjective nature of the bond and how it interacts with the ideal of sovereignty, a feature that is intriguing both conceptually and politically. The temporal ontology invites further investigation of shared being in time as a phenomenon and a political project that actors care about, its link to trust and impact on behavior. It will be fruitful to complement this with a better understanding of how the language of friendship is used by political actors,³² and how this is intertwined with role recognition of the other as a “friend.” Above all, the article directs attention to the complex and challenging endeavor of *building* friendship, the process of becoming friends, and to the importance of the historical context out of which a relationship evolves. While the case analyzed here confirms the difficulty of turning a relationship with a history of extreme violence into a friendship, more work is needed on the indicators for when a reconciliation process has reached that point, and how a traumatic past shapes what kind of friendship is possible. Finally, instead of treating friendship as the end point of a progressive evolution, we should explore how friendship itself is transformative and continuously evolving. In this regard, future studies may also want to look beyond bilateral relations and assess how third parties and domestic political constellations and agendas affect the scope and the possibility of interstate friendship.

Interviews/Background Conversations

1. Interview with senior Israeli diplomat (Israel’s Embassy in Berlin, May 2016).
2. Interview with former senior Israeli diplomat (Berlin, June 2016).
3. Interview with head of NGO for German–Israeli civil society cooperation (Berlin, August 2016).
4. Interview with Israeli journalist who covers Israel–German relations (Berlin, August 2016).
5. Interview with German diplomat A (via phone, July 1, 2016).
6. Interview with German diplomat B (Foreign Ministry, Berlin, July 7, 2016).
7. Interview with German diplomat C (Foreign Ministry, Berlin, July 8, 2016).
8. Interview with German diplomat D (Foreign Ministry, Berlin, July 24, 2017).
9. Interview with German diplomat E (Foreign Ministry, Berlin, July 25, 2017).
10. Interview with German diplomat F (Chancellor’s Office, Berlin, July 25, 2017).
11. Interview with German diplomat G (Chancellor’s Office, Berlin, July 19, 2019).
12. Interview with German diplomat H (Foreign Ministry, Berlin, July 2016, 2017, 2019).
13. Interview with Shimon Stein, former Israeli Ambassador to Germany (Berlin, July 19, 2019).

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³⁰In private, Israeli officials admit that this aspect of the relationship is convenient to Israel “and of course we would like to preserve it, [...] we have interest in that” (Interview 2). See also Haaretz (2015).

³¹We found little evidence for such a commitment. When we asked our interviewees for examples of Israel’s solidarity with Germany they seemed puzzled by the question. Some admitted they had never thought about it.

³²See Berenskötter (2021) for an attempt.

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