

*German President Horst Köhler*

# **I'm a Realist in the Spirit of Ben-Gurion**

**On the fortieth anniversary of German-Israeli Relations**

40 years – this number and this time span are of great symbolic significance in the history of the Jewish people. They are often mentioned in the Torah. This year German-Israeli relations also reach an age of Biblical proportions: In a few weeks, we and our Israeli friends will celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between our countries.

I would like to invite the readers of the *TRIBÜNE* to make their way once again through these forty years along with me. The beginning lies, in fact, long before 12th May 1965.

In full consciousness of the crimes committed by Germany, the first West German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, fought with all his authority and all his might for compensation and reparations. David Ben-Gurion, the first Israeli prime minister, was Adenauer's like-minded partner. It is he who said, "Anyone who doesn't believe in miracles is not a realist." Pictures of the meetings between David Ben-Gurion and Konrad Adenauer in New York and in the Negev Desert appear before our eyes. The founding fathers of Israel and of the other, new Germany bridged the chasm created by a crime unparalleled in the history of the occidental world. Compensation and reparation – these were contentious concepts and topics in both Germany and Israel. In Germany there was also fierce opposition to the legislation that had to be introduced in the Bundestag. The chancellor achieved a majority only with the votes of the SPD, in opposition at the time – 35 members of parliament voted against it in March 1953; 89 abstained.

As long ago as 1955, a first German youth group travelled to Israel; Erich Ollenhauer, then the West German SPD party chairman, visited Israel in March 1957 at the invitation of the Israeli government. Israeli scientists also reached out to propose cooperation with their German counterparts as early as 1959, and invited the Max Planck Society to the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot. From this first meeting there quickly arose a scientific cooperation fruitful for both sides, and it was put on a contractual basis in June 1964. The mayor of West Berlin, the Social Democrat Heinrich Albertz, visited a series of Israeli towns in 1964 and paved the way for cooperation between the *Deutscher Städtetag*, or German Association of Cities and Towns, and the Israeli Union of Local Authorities.



So the establishment of diplomatic relations between our two countries on that 12th May 1965 was overdue. It completed a development that had long been in the offing. Admittedly, it did not exactly trigger rejoicing; it was more a marriage of convenience, and some people dismissed it. In an editorial on 13th May 1965, a West German newspaper said that it “welcomed the normalisation of relations between the countries . . . with the gravity befitting the matter”, thus echoing the mood in West Germany. On the Israeli side, diplomatic relations were seen as a “pragmatic necessity”, as the former ambassador Avi Primor wrote in 1995, in the special issue of the TRIBÜNE marking the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of German-Israeli relations. Who could ever have imagined back then how positively they would develop, culminating in a trusting partnership? The first Israeli ambassador to Germany, Asher Ben-Natan, remembers having said in 1965 that all the hurdles would have been removed when a Goethe Institute existed in Israel and great numbers of German tourists came to Israel. He adds that he could not believe at the time that these developments would come so quickly.

German-Israeli relations cannot be detached from the context of the situation in the Middle East. As a reaction to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel, ten Arab nations broke off relations with West Germany. Just two years later, Israel found itself at war with three neighbouring Arab states. The existence of this small isolated country was at risk. Fears ran high in West Germany as well, and there were numerous demonstrations of solidarity. The relief was great when Israel managed to hold its own in the Six-Day War.

As great as the fears and apprehensions were in 1967, the enthusiasm was just as great, here as well, when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat stepped out of the plane in November 1977 in Jerusalem, was received by Prime Minister Begin and delivered his historic speech to the Knesset. The Camp David Accords followed in 1978. For the first time, an Arab state makes peace with Israel; Israel leaves the territories it had occupied during the Six-Day War. This courageous action shows that war and enmity need not be the destiny of the Middle East region. Peace and cooperation are possible.

The year 1989 brings a historic watershed: the Cold War ends and the divisions of Europe and Germany are overcome. The peaceful revolution reunites millions of jubilant people in Berlin. But these images do not produce joy everywhere in the world. The initial fears that a reunited and stronger Germany will pursue different policies prove groundless. Germany is and remains a trustworthy partner in the European Union, in the transatlantic alliance and in the United Nations. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl emphasises that it is just such a reunified Germany that will remain a friend of Israel: “The State of Israel and a unified Germany will be able to base their cooperation on a broad foundation of mutual convictions. . . Both countries are committed to the same values, based on democracy and the rule of law.” The Israeli foreign minister also declares that the world has nothing to fear from a democratic Germany.

In the Middle East region the situation also seems to be changing fundamentally. In 1993 and 1994 the Oslo and the Gaza/Jericho Accords are signed; in 1994 Israel and Jordan conclude a peace agreement. Arab countries other than Egypt and Jordan also establish diplomatic relations with Israel. After the end of the East-West conflict, it seems as though another decades-old conflict is nearing an end, the “peace of the brave” seems to be laid out for the long term. In his speech to the German Bundestag in 1996, Israel’s president, Ezer Weizman, made clear both the hopes and the fears of that time: “Since the signing of the peace agreement with Jordan we have now signed the Oslo Agreement with the Palestinians, struck

up dialogue and economic ties with further Arab states and initiated first, though not simple, peace contacts with Syria. Hope is in the air, but we must not let illusions mislead us. A feeling of foreignness still exists between the two nations. Gradually a bridge of mutual understanding is being created, but we still have to invest a great deal in building this bridge and make certain that its supports are stable.” Nowadays, after the outbreak of the second intifada, we know that people’s hopes have not been fulfilled, including those of the people in Germany, which supported the peace process energetically from the very start.

At the end of our journey together, I would like to single out two events that show how close Germans and Israelis have become. On 5th February 2000 German President Johannes Rau became the first German to deliver a speech to the Knesset in German. Who but Johannes Rau could have made this speech? His name has a very special ring to it in Israel. I consider the joint dedication of the synagogue in Wuppertal during a visit by President Moshe Katsav in December 2002 just as remarkable. With this impressive gesture the President of the State of Israel paid tribute to the emergence of new Jewish life in Germany.



*German Chancellor Dr Konrad Adenauer with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in New York, on 14 March 1960. (Photograph: Bundesbildstelle)*

Nobody has described bridging the chasm that divided Germans and Israelis better than former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres. He has characterised the relationship between Israel and Germany as “extremely complex and painfully difficult relations”, which developed from “abysmally deep enmity into a comprehensive and unprejudiced partnership, the likes of which the State of Israel rarely enjoys.” I would like to add that after forty years of

cooperation, the people in Israel know that Germany stands at Israel's side as a friend, in both good and bad times.

Many people in both countries have contributed to smoothing the way we have just taken. It is almost a feature of German-Israeli relations that, from the very first, they existed on far more than just official and government levels. Cities and local districts, parliamentarians, trade unions, scientists, artists, schoolchildren, students and young people have created a tightly-knit network of personal relationships that make German-Israeli relations unique. But I would like to single out one group for special mention, and those are the "Jeckes", the German Jews who settled in Israel. Germany had repudiated, persecuted and expelled them – yet after the war they were the first to reach out to us in reconciliation.

So we have good reason to celebrate. And we intend to do so. When you read these lines, I will already have paid my first official visit to Israel. This visit marks the beginning of a multitude of events in this German-Israeli anniversary year. I look forward with great pleasure and anticipation to this trip, the conversations with people and visiting the cultural and historical sites. In May President Katsav will then come to Germany once again. We plan to hold a big celebration in the garden of Charlottenburg Palace together with young people, first and foremost, but also with all those who have contributed to our good relations.

The past forty years have seen great developments and sweepingly radical changes. What will the next forty years bring? I have no fears for German-Israeli relations, because they are sustained by so many people in friendly solidarity in both countries. We Germans are conscious of the historical responsibility that we bear towards the State of Israel. For me, as for my predecessors in office, it will be an affair of the heart to use the means my office provides to maintain and strengthen our bilateral relations, which will always have an exceptional nature.

We Germans and Europeans, who live in an area of peace and security, have a moral duty to help to change the Middle East and Mediterranean from a zone of crisis and conflict into a region of peace and stability. I envision an area where Israel and a democratic, viable Palestinian state live peacefully together. I envision an area in which there are secure borders that are also open and that have lost their function of separating peoples in everyday life. This is admittedly a bold vision, but it is no Utopia. These aims do not lie in an inaccessible Never-Never Land. There are ways that lead there, ways we must find together, just as Konrad Adenauer and David Ben-Gurion did more than half a century ago. Why should what was possible in Europe, what was possible between the "arch-enemies" Germany and France and between Germany and Israel, not succeed in the Mediterranean? I confess to being a realist in the spirit of Ben-Gurion.