

# We do not want to draw a line

**TRIBÜNE Conversation with Angela Merkel,  
Chairwoman of the CDU and the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group in the Bundestag**

**TRIBÜNE:** Until shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, the GDR took a stance that was unambiguously hostile to Israel; there were no relations. How did you perceive the policies of your government at the time?

**MERKEL:** As a scientist in particular I found this attitude utterly abnormal. For instance, the GDR had no postal communication with Israel. If we wanted reprints of articles by Israeli scientists, we always had to write to acquaintances in America so that they could get the documents and send them to us. We didn't even have a way to make photocopies in the GDR – all that is unimaginable today. There was no contact whatsoever with Israel. Of course, I rejected this stance. I was very pleased when the first freely-elected parliament of the GDR established relations with Israel in 1990 and put an end to this lunacy.



**TRIBÜNE:** Close contacts to the PLO und Yasser Arafat existed – they were officially extolled as “brotherly”. There was support for the Palestinians in their fight against the “imperialistic Jewish state”.

**MERKEL:** I never shared this one-sided support of the PLO either. At home we spoke critically of the Palestinians' activities with my parents. It was known, for instance, that they had trained western European terrorists. That is why I never had any illusions about the PLO. Of course, we also noticed that the Arab states hadn't done enough to help the Palestinian refugees to obtain better living conditions.

**TRIBÜNE:** So it can be seen that there was no integration of the Palestinians in the Arab states like that of the expellees in Germany after the Second World War, for instance.

**MERKEL:** Real integration did not take place in the Arab countries; instead the Palestinians were deliberately left to live in refugee camps.

**TRIBÜNE:** Can you explain why, in the EU and the media, the PLO finds much more sympathy and understanding than the Israelis and their defence measures?

**MERKEL:** Just as a secure Israel is necessary, a viable Palestinian state must be created – everyone agrees with that now. That is the core aim for resumption of the peace process on the basis of the Road Map. What was not right, however, was the way the EU provided funds to the Palestinians just at the moment when Israel wanted to exert pressure by withholding tax revenues. The EU did not even set guidelines on how the money should be spent. As for criticism of the building of the security barrier, personally, I would have liked a more measured response. In this respect, I would strongly argue that Germany must always use its policies to fulfil its special responsibility towards Israel. The German foreign minister has, however, already demonstrated that in many cases.

**TRIBÜNE:** Still, the question arises of whether, after more than sixty years of peace here in this country, we actually have the right to pass judgement on Israel's self-defence measures.

**MERKEL:** It is certainly not easy to assess the situation in Israel from Germany. When one visits the country, one experiences a situation that is very difficult, not just politically, but also regarding living conditions as a whole. The decisive point is: how can we judge accurately the situation in a region where Israel is the only democracy on a western model? I am convinced that people in Israel also know how important the resumption of the Middle East peace process is. This process has in the past already brought substantial advances, regarding the relationship between Israel and Egypt, for example. We all want a better situation in the Middle East in future. We want the Israelis to live in peace and security. Nevertheless, we should also always continue to try to put ourselves in their place.

**TRIBÜNE:** In both German states there were long and agonising discussions on how the Nazi past should be regarded. In 1953, the Federal Republic of Germany was finally able to bring itself to assume responsibility for the crimes of the National Socialists in Germany against the European Jews, and pay compensation – not only to the survivors of the Shoah in the Diaspora, but also to the Jewish state. In contrast, the GDR, which had elevated anti-fascism to dogma, refused to consider doing so.

**MERKEL:** The attitude of the GDR towards Israel arose from the fact that the GDR saw itself as having nothing to do with National Socialism. It was a communist country, the communists had been – according to the official party line – on the right side, and in that respect they did not feel in the least answerable for the appalling events of the war, but instead held the Federal Republic of Germany responsible. From this self-image came the insolent idea that there was no need to recognise Israel. The GDR leadership made reappraising history easy for themselves: they simply felt they were on the right side. Only the communists who had suffered were taken care of. The idea of the extermination of the Jewish people, the uniqueness of the Holocaust, was ignored. When we were taken on tours of the concentration camp memorials as children, and that happened very often, only the murdered communists were spoken of there.

**TRIBÜNE:** Jews were not mentioned at all?

**MERKEL:** Seldom; sporadically. Jews played a completely subordinate role – perhaps Jewish communists. When you think about it today, it seems utterly inconceivable and completely grotesque.

**TRIBÜNE:** Jewish communists as the only recognised Nazi victims among the Jews.

**MERKEL:** Yes, that was basically the case. The Jews, the Polish forced labourers, the Social Democrats were mentioned in passing, but essentially, in the GDR, the victims of the Nazis were first and foremost communists.

**TRIBÜNE:** In this way they appropriated the role of victim . . .

**MERKEL:** ... and thus were relieved of any blame. It was declared that the GDR was the part of Germany that had learned the right lesson from National Socialism and that its sphere was peopled exclusively by those whose only association with Nazism was as victims. I could never share this view.

**TRIBÜNE:** People in Israel feel the effects of terrorism more plainly and painfully than those in nearly all other countries. Instead of making people aware of that and accepting their defensive measures, such as the construction of a security barrier or preventive strikes against terrorists, most western politicians condemn them fiercely. The victims of terrorism become the accused.

**MERKEL:** In our judgements, we must always keep in mind that the State of Israel is still surrounded by people and countries that deny its right to exist. Naturally, this gives rise to a constant and justified struggle for existence, and that leads to a whole range of conclusions being drawn regarding self-defence. You are perfectly right. Victims must never become the accused. But it must also be possible to ask Israel questions in an amicable and critical dialogue. I think there is a difference between condemnation and questioning. When we ask whether Israel's present course is the only possible one, that promotes dialogue. This dialogue is essential because it is the only way we can also understand Israel's conduct.

**TRIBÜNE:** Many German and European politicians, among them members of the CDU/CSU, have censured Israel and called for European Union involvement in a Middle East peace solution in accordance with UN resolutions. What is your position?

**MERKEL:** I do not share the one-sided criticism of Israel. We all attached great hopes to a resumption of the Middle East peace process on the basis of the Road Map. We have had the good fortune to be able to see a great improvement in relations between Israel and Egypt in recent decades. Now, of course, we hope such a process will be possible with other countries. I find it very courageous for the Israeli prime minister to have introduced the withdrawal from Gaza as a unilateral move on Israel's part. I was very impressed by the speech in which he described how he himself had once encouraged settlements in the Gaza Strip, and that, despite this, he now draws very different conclusions from the present-day situation. One can only hope that these courageous steps are successful, and that even the countries and people who are not bound to Israel in friendship recognise them. This Israeli withdrawal ought to bring new movement into the peace process. Speaking for my party, I can say: we want progress in accordance with the Road Map.

**TRIBÜNE:** Since you refer to the Road Map: how do you think negotiations should proceed? Time and again, every date for talks with the Palestinian administration that has been announced has been torpedoed by a dreadful terrorist attack that ultimately prevented talks from taking place.

**MERKEL:** That is what is so distressing. Terrorism and bombs cannot accompany a peace process.

**TRIBÜNE:** There could already have been a Palestinian state long ago, if Camp David had not collapsed. At the time, the Palestinians could have got back 98 percent of the occupied territories.

**MERKEL:** It was a good pathway that was opened there, and it was a grave mistake for the Palestinian side to have refused this far-reaching offer at the time.

**TRIBÜNE:** Most of the 25 EU member states tend to sympathise with the Palestinians. In the past, the Federal Republic of Germany frequently made efforts to promote sympathy

for Israel's cause there as well. Those efforts have decreased, because Germany's priority nowadays is reaching consensus within the EU.

**MERKEL:** Germany must do both: of course we also need common European positions on Middle East policies. But because of its very specific relationship to Israel, Germany, of all countries, must clearly stand up for Israel's interests in the European Union.

**TRIBÜNE:** What places in Israel would you like to visit, and with whom would you like to speak there?

**MERKEL:** I would very much like to go to the Sea of Galilee again. I was once in Tiberias, many years ago. The way you can see the crossing to Syria, the Golan Heights, made a deep impression on me. That is a good example of how the situation is on the ground – something we in Germany cannot really imagine properly. When you look at it, you get a feeling for conditions as they really are. I was also in Haifa, in a school in which Russian children were being integrated and learning Hebrew. But I have never been on a kibbutz; that would interest me very much. And I would like to travel to the Dead Sea. So there are many destinations in Israel that I haven't yet seen at all.

**TRIBÜNE:** Shimon Stein, Israel's ambassador in Berlin, complained in a conversation with TRIBÜNE that the frequently-affirmed "special relations between Germany and Israel" no longer exist as they once did. He expressed the fear that the change in generations might be accompanied by the attempt to draw a line under recent history.

**MERKEL:** The German chancellor often speaks of the post-war era as having come to an end. I think such formulations must be used very cautiously. On the one hand, it is true that Germany is reunited; that was a great sign of confidence in our country on the part of the international community. Because of that, we have the same rights and the same obligations as other countries. All the same, we can never steal away from our history just because of this positive development. The founding of the State of Israel was also linked to Nazism's appalling persecution and extermination; it provided the decisive impetus. As aware as we are of the positive chapters of German history, we must not forget the negative chapters. That is why the relationship between Israel and Germany will always be of a special nature. Admittedly, I, too, belong to the generation that was born after the Second World War, but I will never forget that.

**TRIBÜNE:** But the German chancellor's formulation on the end of the post-war era refers to the success in obtaining compensation for forced labourers. With the admission of this guilt and the attempt to compensate financially those slave labourers who are still alive, an epoch of indecision, of refusal to face up to the consequences of the war, has come to an end.

**MERKEL:** Yes, the compensation of forced labourers was an important point, but it does not yet close this chapter of history. One outstanding problem has been solved, but that does not change the past. You cannot pay your way out of history.

**TRIBÜNE:** Although there were always individual parliamentarians from the CDU/CSU who passionately pleaded for the statute of limitations to be lifted for Nazi crimes, in Bundestag debates a majority of your party has always demanded an end to prosecution. That must leave the public with the impression that your party is trying to "draw a line" under the Nazi era.

**MERKEL:** It is most emphatically not true that the CDU wants an end to prosecution of Nazi crimes. That is just why a time limit on prosecution for murder or genocide – in contrast to all other crimes – is out of the question for us. And we do not want to "draw a line" under the Nazi era.

**TRIBÜNE:** A person like you, who holds an important political position and aspires to more, must certainly have role models. Who are your greatest role models among Israeli and German politicians of the past and present?

**MERKEL:** In German politics, Konrad Adenauer was certainly a very impressive personage, in terms of the history of my party as well. Among Israeli politicians, Menachem Begin impressed me very much. He took part in the Six-Day War against Egypt himself. He was considered a hardliner, but he helped initiate and push forward the peace process. I find that impressive. And now that I have had several opportunities to meet Shimon Peres, he has become one of the Israeli politicians I admire personally. He did so much to awaken understanding for Israel, and although he cannot be considered a hardliner, he has always represented his country's interests with rigour. It would be a spectacular mistake to see in him a soft left-winger who would accede to anything. He has always said clearly, "This far, and not a step further". That is particularly true where his attitude towards the Palestinians is concerned. I was able to talk with him several times about Arafat. Peres also took a hard line with him, although he tried everything to reach a peace settlement.

**TRIBÜNE:** If you become chancellor, to what country would you pay your first state visit?

**MERKEL:** Israel is generally a country that should be among the first a German chancellor visits.

The conversation was conducted by Otto R. Romberg.