

## Towards a more active role for Germany in Palestine

### I. Introduction

Germany is the largest economy in the European Union, with a GDP of USD 3.85t in 2020 according to the World Bank.<sup>1</sup> It has no enemies and has good relations with almost all actors. In the context of the Middle East, it does not have a colonial history and has not been involved in any military conflict. Residents of the Arab region are generally appreciative of the positions taken by Germany in supporting justice and of its development orientation; the Syrian refugee issue is a strong example. It also has various strengths in terms of technology and creativity, a strong economy, advanced medical services, freedom of the press, women's rights, respect for human rights, literature and culture.

Germany is considered a democratic state committed to global values and Palestinians look to the Germans as an ambitious, warm, open, optimistic and hard-working people, desiring an enhanced and effective German role in solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Palestinian leadership also believes so. Civil society believes in Germany's cumulative role towards society-building and achieving development. German institutions have supported this trend by providing funds to support the most needed sectors in Palestine. Germany is also the most important partner for Israel after the United States, and for historical reasons Germany has a special relationship with Israel. As German chancellor Angela Merkel said a few years ago, "the security of the State of Israel is one of the foundations of German policy" in a clear recognition of this commitment.<sup>2</sup>

Political analysts affirm that Germany's political role in Palestine is not equal to its economic and humanitarian aspects, as its foreign policy is conservative, or hesitant. Germany has a political line that is consistent with and does not transcend the supreme interest of the EU. It does not share its political line with the US and prefers a balance between the requirements of democracy and stability. This is evident in how it deals with conflicts in the Middle East, as exemplified in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Syria. Germany has the potential to offer advice and present a package of solutions as a roadmap. This article presents mechanisms that would enhance the German role and the possibilities of future intervention in both the Palestinian-Palestinian and Palestinian-Israeli tracks.

### II. Germany and Israel/Palestine

Germany has had advanced diplomatic relations with the Palestinians in the decades since the Oslo Accords and the formation of the Palestinian National Authority. It was the first country to open a diplomatic representation in Jericho and currently has a representative office in Ramallah, while there is also a Palestinian mission in Berlin. Germany supports the two-state solution and encourages other parties to support it, considering it a basis for peace in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> The German representative to the Palestinian Authority carries out many activities aimed at communicating with Palestinians, including farmers, labourers and fishermen, talking to them about their living conditions. There are also several German institutions working in the Palestinian Territories, providing support and funding in many fields.

<sup>1</sup> According to the World Bank: <https://tinyurl.com/4pc3hnts>.

<sup>2</sup> Deutsche Welle, *Sensitive complications prevent Germany from mediating between Palestinians and Israelis*, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> German Representation in Ramallah, *Development cooperation and humanitarian aid*, 2018.

Germany continues to support the Palestinian government, budget, infrastructure, police and Central Election Commission, also supporting many NGOs through regular grants. Germany was the largest supporter of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in 2020, contributing USD 182m, and last December provided USD 21m in emergency support.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Germany maintains strategic relations with Israel and considers its security and stability as part of German policy in large part due to its historical responsibility towards the Jewish people. Since diplomatic relations were established in 1965, German-Israeli relations have continuously intensified and deepened, both at the official level and in civil society. Today, German-Israeli relations are close and friendly. In February 2016, the cabinets of both countries met for the sixth time. In addition, numerous official visits in both directions bear witness to the intensity and diversity of relations.<sup>5</sup>

Palestinians generally tend to view Germany positively in international politics. The majority believe that Germany is interested in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and would prefer for Germany to have the strongest relationship with the Palestinian Authority among all European countries.<sup>6</sup> Most also believe that Germany is an important partner for Israel and that it supports Israel's right to exist. The majority simultaneously think that Israeli-German relations are excellent and do not fully agree with Germany's approach to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The author of this article believes that Germany should not let its special relationship with Israel limit its approach to a convergence of views in the conflict. The Palestinians strongly believe that Germany can take a more active role and will support it in doing so.

### III. The possibilities of German engagement in the Palestinian Territories

Germany's recent elections produced a new government and a new chancellor, resulting in a traffic-light coalition (social democrats, liberal democrats and greens). Upon analysis of the government's agreement and framework, its priorities relate to issues such as climate, domestic tax reform, wages and immigration. The Russian-Ukrainian crisis then arose. Despite all this, the government has also prioritised the Middle East: foreign minister Annalena Baerbock travelled to the region, meeting with Israeli leaders and President of the State of Palestine Mahmoud Abbas as well as her counterparts in Jordan and Egypt. She stressed the importance of strengthening the peace efforts as well as other issues. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh has confirmed that "The success of the peace process needs clear and agreed references, confidence-building measures, an honest mediator for the peace process, as well as a clear and agreed time frame... Germany and Europe can seek through the (Quartet) to fill the political gap that the region is now experiencing."<sup>7</sup>

Politically, Germany can play an active political role on two issues based on its strengths:

#### *III.1 Unity among Palestinians (reconciliation efforts)*

Like many countries, Germany has committed itself to a no-contact policy with Hamas in Gaza. This commitment may prevent direct German intervention to support dialogue between the Palestinians. Achieving unity between Gaza and the West Bank is a key requirement for a return to the peace process, unifying the political system to revive the

<sup>4</sup> UNRWA, *Germany contributes euro 21 million in support of UNRWA education and health services in Gaza and the West Bank as well as shelter reconstruction in Gaza*, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Deutsche Botschaft in Tel Aviv, *Deutsch-israelische Beziehungen*, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, *Palestinian Perception of Germany and its Policy on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Cabinet of Palestine, *Shtayyeh calls on Germany to recognize the State of Palestine*, 2022.

two-state solution and avoid a new war on civilians in Gaza. In sessions with German diplomats, I have spoken about the need to find a different mechanism to cooperate with NGOs and the private sector in order to strengthen pressure towards Palestinian reconciliation through think tanks, the youth and women's communities.

Similar to the German experience after the reunification between Berlin and Bonn, the wide gap between Gaza and the West Bank in economic, humanitarian and legal levels mirrors what existed between East and West Germany. I interacted with German experts during my visits to Berlin and other cities, trying to explore Germany's approach to bridging the gap and unifying policies (laws, trade, business organisations, credit, chambers of commerce and civil society). Germany can reproduce its experience by building bridges between German and Palestinian institutions to restore harmony in civil areas that do not raise political sensitivity.

### *III.2 Peace process dialogue*

We can observe that there is no direct active role for German foreign policy in the peace process in the region despite Germany's advanced relationship with all. Germany can be the honest advisor to both Palestinians and Israelis; its history should create an incentive to play this role. Germany has assumed historical responsibility and continues to do so, supporting efforts to create peace in Europe and in the world, including United Nations resolutions. It is a country capable of changing and condemning all acts that reduce the chances of a real peace for humanity.

The US has not been able to play the role of a credible mediator due to reduced levels of trust among Palestinians, particularly following President Donald Trump's decisions towards Jerusalem, settlement-building,

embassy relocation and other issues. While Europe has played a key role in the peace process since the Oslo talks, Germany can build on the European position as a leading country and offer an initiative in coordination with the US administration through an international peace conference in Berlin that brings together the relevant parties. Germany can prepare by engaging in Track II diplomacy and generating informal discussion with politicians and academics to hold this conference given the advantage it holds with Arab and Muslim countries. Over the past months, the German Foreign Ministry has held separate meetings with Israelis and Palestinians to formulate a policy initiative, which I believe must be completed. The cessation of the peace process and expansion of settlements increase the risk of creating new confrontations, and the dozens of violent clashes that have taken place in Jerusalem and the West Bank areas in the past few years are indications of what the situation could be like in the near future in the absence of political and security solutions.

Achieving breakthroughs in the economy, education, medicine and technology, and with a high humanitarian orientation towards all, Germany must take the initiative to enter new fields that increase its chances of impact and give it a new power added to its soft power, employing its capabilities to support peace in the Middle East. Germany can continue to support development and humanitarian concerns in the following two directions:

### *III.3 Democracy, governance and institution-building*

It is not desirable to use threatening formulas or conditional funding in dealings at the political level, as this is not generally received well by the Palestinians and leads to bad dialogue and advice. The provision of alternatives can yield more meaningful and effective results:

- **Dynamic democracy:** Since 2006, no public elections have been held and millions of young people have never had the right to choose political leaders to represent them. Elections were scheduled for May 2021 but were postponed after Israel prevented Jerusalem citizens from voting. It was a major shock to the Palestinians hoping for smooth change. 36 lists had been registered for the elections, 26 of which were formed by young people. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's position had been clear in supporting the elections and we hope that the current government will continue effective dialogue with Israelis and Palestinians towards facilitating elections before June 2023. Holding public elections can open the way for an ongoing democratic process in all civil bodies (universities, trade unions, municipalities and other bodies).
- **Good governance and institution-building:** Supporting the government in promoting the principle of the separation of powers leads to transparency, supports the reduction of corruption suspicions and improves government performance. Continuing to support government institutions further improves their response. Supporting the public budget, infrastructure and the local government sector increases quality-of-life opportunities for Palestinians, increases job creation and fundamentally improves society's attitudes towards peace. Since 1994, Germany has supported all Palestinian sectors, and it has a significant impact today: in government and the security institutions as well as in the private and non-governmental sector.

### *III.4 What about the Gaza Strip?*

Since 2007, the Gaza Strip has faced four destructive wars, which have had a negative impact on people, institutions, infrastructure and facilities. Many homes have not yet been rebuilt. Gaza has also been under siege since that year under the de facto government of Hamas. The suffering of two million Palestinians (65% under 30 years of age) has become deeper in this small and challenging region. There is extremism, radicalism, a rise in poverty and the highest unemployment in the world according to international reports. The continuation of the siege will exacerbate the crisis and lead to a renewed military conflict, meaning more demolition of the homes, factories and infrastructure supported by donors including Germany. Not renewing the conflict and preventing its causes is a duty for all. There are mechanisms that address the origin of the problem, such as ensuring the free movement of people and goods as well as enabling Palestinians to work in Israel and travel for learning purposes. All of the above comply with international law, support human development and bring stability, which is in everyone's interest. Last December, Germany provided a financial support package to the Palestinians, including EUR 6m in financial aid to rebuild nearly 150 destroyed homes and support 50 families in meeting their urgent psychosocial relief needs. An appropriate mechanism needs to be developed to accelerate reconstruction and provide stability to those affected.<sup>8</sup>

### **IV. Conclusion**

Germany can influence events on four issues: Palestinian unity; the peace process and confidence-building; governance and institution-building; and the humanitarian dilemma in the Gaza Strip. It can affect all of these trends despite other priorities, with unutilised capabilities that may help in addressing them.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; UNRWA, *Germany contributes euro 21 million in support of UNRWA education and health services in Gaza and the West Bank as well as shelter reconstruction in Gaza, 2021.*

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