

THE ISRAEL PROJECT

**CONFERENCE CALL:
20 YEARS AFTER GERMANY'S REUNIFICATION**

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CHRISTOPH HEIL: Hello and welcome to the conference call with Ambassador Yoram Ben Zeev. My name is Christoph Heil. I am the Director for European Affairs at The Israel Project, and I am moderating this call. Thank you for joining us today. The topic of this call is, 20 years after Germany's reunification, German-Israeli relations, Israel's strategic challenges, and the status of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Today's briefing is on the record.

The Israel Project is a nonprofit educational organization that provides factual information about Israel and the Middle East to press, policymakers and the public. Now I'd like to introduce you to our speaker. Ambassador Yoram Ben-Zeev is Israel's ambassador to Berlin. Ambassador Ben-Zeev has served in many senior positions as a diplomat. His overseas postings included Los Angeles, where he served as consul general, and previously, Hong Kong and Manila.

Until his current posting, he was the foreign ministry's Senior Deputy Director General for North America. The ambassador was coordinator for the peace process on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the 1990s. He was a member of the Israeli delegation to the Israel-Jordanian-Palestinian peace talks in preparation for the signing of the Declaration of Principles. In 2000, he was the envoy of the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak for the preparations of the second Camp David Summit. He was also adviser to the president of the state of Israel in the 1980s and 1990s.

Ambassador, we are pleased to have you with us, and I'd like to turn it over to you for some opening comments. After that, we will move to the questions that were sent in by the people joining us today. Thank you very much.

AMBASSADOR YORAM BEN-ZEEV: Thank you very much, Christoph. I'm delighted to be here, delighted to have all of you on the line. I hope that all of you have – just a brief comment and then we can go right into the question-and-answer session.

Mentioning the 20 years of unification of Germany, I've just been reminded of invitations that I got from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, which is a very important establishment and organization in Berlin, to discuss the aspect of the unification and verification (ph) of the unification 20 years ago in Israel. And I'm reminded of very, how should I say, fierce exchanges of views and letters between the then-Prime Minister Shamir of Israel and the Bundeskanzler at that time, Helmut Kohl.

And I'm so delighted – by the way, at that time, two ministers were involved in – how should I put it – in relaxing the atmosphere between Shamir and the Kanzler. One was the foreign minister at that time, Moshe Arens. I'm sure he is known to all of you. And his deputy, a guy named Bibi Netanyahu – today, Israel's prime minister. So the fierce exchange of letters about the unification is way, way behind us and I, again, welcome you all. I hope that one day,

we can see both either in Jerusalem or in Berlin. I suggest that we go right now into the questions session, and I'll try to be as candid as a diplomat can be in answering your questions.

MR.HEIL: Thank you very much for the introduction. We have had a number of questions sent in by the people that are on the call listening, and we'll jump right into it. The first question we have is concerning the German-Israeli relationship, could you comment on the recent visit of Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle to Israel and the Gaza Strip? Also, later this month, there is the first presidential visit of President Christian's Wulff planned. And in January, there is Chancellor Merkel traveling with members of the cabinet to Israel for the inter-government consultations. Based on these bilateral visits, how would you describe the political relationship between Israel and Germany today?

AMB. BEN-ZEEV: Well, let us take it step by step, or as they say in Deutsch, Schritt fur Schritt – step by step by step. You asked me, in the – you begun with the visit of the foreign minister – the German foreign minister to Israel. This is the second visit since the two countries – in about a little more than a year. He was invited by the foreign minister of Israel, Avigdor Lieberman, to reciprocate a visit of Lieberman two weeks earlier in Berlin.

I think that the visit reflects the really excellent relations – personal relations between the two ministers, but also the very good relations between the two countries. In the talks between Lieberman and Mr. Westerwelle, issues of a bilateral nature took the major place. And I really can say that we can go, later maybe, in depth into that issue, but that the commonality and the common basis, the common denominator between the two countries, as has been explained by both foreign ministers, is really excellent.

This is not to say that there are no differences of opinion in, especially, the issue of the political process, the so-called “peace process,” and on the issue of freezing – or settlement politics. Certainly, there is a difference of opinion between Mr. Westerwelle and Mr. Lieberman. So is the difference of opinion between the Bundeskanzler, meaning the chancellor, Merkel, and the former, prime minister [Benjamin Netanyahu], as well.

But on the bilateral relations, I really think that they've come to a peak. And we can mention a few of the joint projects that we have on the bilateral level: exchange of students, exchange of journalists, exchange of younger politicians of various parties, et cetera. Now, later, Mr. Westerwelle was invited by Mr. Lieberman to visit Gaza, [and he] visited Gaza.

But he didn't go to Gaza before he saw Mr. Noam Shalit, the father of the kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit, for a long, long conversation in Jerusalem. And I have to say that the first thing that he did on his trip to Gaza, he made a very clear and bold language in English and German, a demand for Hamas to release the kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit.

And then he visited a project that deals with treatment of water and sewage in Gaza. This is totally coordinated between Israel and the German government, in particular Avigdor Lieberman and Mr. Westerwelle. After the visit, he had a long briefing of more than an hour by Gen. Dangot, the coordinator of the government policies in Gaza, in the south, and in the West Bank. And I really thought that it was a thorough briefing, in which the situation – both the

security situation and the economic situation in Gaza – were broadly discussed, and again, I think, with complete understanding on behalf of Mr. Westerwelle.

We're talking about the relations. You rightly mentioned what is called the government consultations in the coming January. It will be the third round of consultations, second time in Jerusalem. First time was in March, 2008; second time was later in – early this year in Berlin; and the third round will take place in Jerusalem, as I say, in January. But this is not only the reflections of the excellent – the relations between the two countries.

I can just speak to you – allow me – I'll do it very briefly – a brief serving on the events that are taking place between the two countries. And let's start with the coming innovation day that will take place in Berlin on December 6th, in which many Israeli scientists, innovation people from the innovation industry, high-tech industry, intelligence, technology, et cetera, will be presenting here their merchandise, so to speak, to the German side. This is, again, the second round.

At the same time, there will be a dialogue on the business level between Europe and Israel also taking place in Berlin. This is one thing. The second annual conference of the German-Israeli life sciences took place not long ago in Heidelberg, as the Ernst Cramer and Kollek Fellowship project again took off and there are, right now, a few Israeli journalists in Berlin, as there are German journalists in Israel.

We are going to open, in due course, I hope, in the few months to come, a new office, new consul general in München. This is also an expression of the importance of how both countries see it, and so on and so forth. Let me just end this answer in one aspect: The cultural exchange between Israel and Germany is really tremendous. It is tremendous. Just remember that in last year, we celebrated the – or a year-and-a-half ago, we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the state of Israel. In Germany itself, there were more celebrations – around 350 celebrations – more than in all the world together, including Israel.

And in that exchange, Germany was visited by more than 50 different authors and writers from Israel, and so were a number of Germans visiting Israel. That was a project that was headed by the former foreign minister, Mr. Steinmeier, and myself. And we are very proud to see that Israeli culture has been so well-represented here, as well as German culture in Israel. I come to the end of the answer.

MR.HEIL: Thank you. We received a couple of questions regarding the parliamentary resolution of the Bundestag, calling for the investigation of the events surrounding the Gaza flotilla. The journalist asked: “What is Israel's view of the July Bundestag resolution which condemned Israel for seizing the Gaza flotilla? Did Israel criticize the resolution –the only resolution of a Western parliament slamming Israel for seizing the flotilla? And if Israel didn't criticize the Bundestag, then why? And if yes, what is the criticism? And does Israel see growing anti-Israel sentiments as a problem among all German parties?”

And another question on this same issue: at the recent Israel Congress in Frankfurt, it was said that Germany is Israel's most important partner, following the U.S. Given that France,

Holland, Italy, England, for example, did not single out Israel in a parliamentary resolution, why does Israel believe Germany is its most important ally, following the United States? ”

AMB. BEN-ZEEV: Well, I'll start with the end, with the issue of the last question – the congress in Frankfurt and the alliance between Israel and Germany. Let me say that this statement can be attributed to two prime ministers of Israel – first, Ehud Olmert and Mr. Netanyahu, the current prime minister, as well as by both foreign ministers – the previous and the current foreign minister – and then Defense Minister Ehud Barak. And I totally agree with that assertion, or that statement. In a minute, I will come back to it.

Concerning the Bundestag resolution, I think that the resolution was unnecessary and regret it very much. We believe the declaration of politics should not take place in those places. And I don't think that it served the real goal of stopping terror at large, and in particular, terrorism of Hamas and its supporters in Gaza. We regret it very much. We share our position with our friends in the Bundestag – almost with every single faction, or party, in the Bundestag.

I can say that some of them have admitted, afterwards, both publicly and privately, that this declaration was not the correct means of – was not properly done, was not properly heard. But nevertheless, despite some regrettable elements in this declaration, it also emphasized some important points, and I just would like to mention a couple of them – maybe two or three of the points.

The declaration called to support the call on the international examination of the mission, including the personal connection of the organizations to radical Islamist – Hamas and other radical Islamist organizations. Now, certainly, we know that there are direct connections between the organizers of the flotilla to those organizations.

Second point is that to make clear that Israel's legitimate security interest must be fully preserved. Especially the shelling with rockets from Gaza must be brought to an end immediately. And the smuggling of weapons into Gaza must be suppressed. By the way, this also came directly from the Bundeskanzler – from the chancellor in Germany – also from the minister of foreign affairs, demanding stopping of the smuggling of weaponry, both from sea and from surface, into Gaza district.

And to also work – this is part of the declaration – toward a regular and controlled border traffic that is preserving the security of the Israel population. So I may, again, repeat it that it was regrettable. We didn't like it. I, myself, met every single man that was involved in it. Sorry that I couldn't convince them not to go with it. And I think that right now – I think that right now, most of the people that were involved in it – the architects of this resolution – may think twice of their deeds on this particular event.

One of the initiators of the declaration is one of our best friends of Israel, Mr. Missfelder, and he has continuously worked to improve the relations between Germany and Israel in his capacity in his party, and to guarantee Israel's security. I can attest to it personally. So have many members of the Bundestag. So again, sorry. I don't think that, really, that has changed something in the quality of the relations between Israel and Germany and Germany and Israel. I

know that not all members of the Bundestag are close friends of Israel, not all of them are supporters of Israel.

With the left party, with Linke, I, myself, had exchanges, sometimes fierce exchanges, to the degree that the chief of the party claimed that I'm stepping out of the jurisdiction or role of ambassador in a country, to exchange information with Mr. Gysi, the chief of the party. I'm sorry to say that I hardly can convince him, on some issues that concern Gaza and our struggle to block the import of weaponry and export of terrorism from that piece of land. One will try again and again and again and again, and I hope that one day, we'll be able to convince the Linke party – the left party – as well.

The question of if there is a growing anti-Israeli sentiment in the parliament. Certainly, there is not – I don't know that there is a growing anti-Israeli sentiment. There are sentiments that have been expressed before. I may say that, as we didn't like it in the past, we don't like it in the present, and certainly, we are going to try to change it in the future. And I can say that what I really am bothered is people that – one name you have mentioned in your question, I don't want to repeat the name – they are coming in, so-to-speak intellectual view or angle in attacking Israel.

Indeed, I really think that they have totally missed their duties as members of the Bundestag. And I certainly am convinced that they've misinterpreted the events in the Middle East. I don't know that even the left party or others can find a more democratic, a better friend of Germany, a better friend of the West, a better advocate of freedom than Israel. Unfortunately, some of them believe that the Hezbollah and the Hamas are demonstrating activities that goes in line in how they see a modern state. Allegorically, I can say that I am very, very disappointed, but I don't think that, that represents the spirit of the Bundestag, as it does not represent the spirit of Germany.

Yes, we criticized the resolution. We did it in a way, also, openly. But diplomacy is also part of conducting the deeds and the negotiations in privacy. And I can tell you that there is no single politician, leader in the Bundestag and outside of the Bundestag that doesn't understand or doesn't know, now, what our feelings and what our attitude is to the issues that were part of the declaration. Did I miss anything? It was a four- or five-part question, if I'm not mistaken.

MR.HEIL: I think you did fine, Sir.

AMB. BEN-ZEEV: If I did, Christoph, please call me to order and I'll be very obedient.

MR.HEIL: The next two questions are on Iran. "Chancellor Merkel refused to heed President Obama's request to shut down the European-Iranian Trade Bank in Hamburg, which, according to the Wall Street Journal, is involved in nuclear proliferation and ballistic activities. The European-Iranian Trade Bank in Hamburg conducts financial transactions for German businesses in Iran. Has Israel asked Germany and Chancellor Merkel to shut down the bank? If not, why?"

The next question, from another journalist: “The German-Israeli parliamentary group headed by Jerzy Montag has taken no action to clamp down on German-Iranian trade, for example, with unilateral German sanctions on Iran. Is Israel satisfied with the work of the German-Israeli parliamentary group? If not, why?”

AMB. BEN-ZEEV: Well, with your permission, I’d like to have a wide angle on that issue, which I’m very, very, very much concerned. On the issue of the EIH, the bank, we have asked, directly, the German government on all levels to close the bank. We work closely – we work really, really closely with our German friends of all different ministries, and there are some legal issues that would hopefully be solved soon, and would allow the closure of the bank.

The issue is the anchor, right now, is in the legal aspect that the Germans would like to screen. We are very much concerned, not only about this bank; we’re deeply concerned over the growth in trade between Germany and Iran. But let me, again, say that – and you can imagine – you and all of our colleagues, the journalists, on the line – that this is a major part of our task, our duties here. I personally deal with the issue in full capacity, including directly with the members of the cabinet and members of the Bundestag, but not only that, also the members and presidents of the different big industries here.

I can mention that I was encouraged by the chancellor to meet all the presidents and CEOs of the big companies that have conducted business or conduct business with Iran. Just to give you a couple of examples, the president of Siemens, the president of MAN Corporation, ThyssenKrupp, and others, with which we then discussed the issue of the Iran sanctions regime.

And I have to say, with great satisfaction, that some of them have decided to sever the trade relations between their respective companies and Iran. We continue to work on it. To say that we are happy, no, we are not happy. I think that the pace should be faster. I think that the depth of these sanctions should be much more painful on the Iranian side. And what we claim time and again, time and again, that the Iranians are working on time.

I was very much disappointed when, on two occasions in München, the security conference, the Iranians were invited, even more disappointed when the foreign minister or the head of the Majlis, Larijani, took the stage and, from there, spread anti-Semitic statements, to the point that a German member of the Bundestag has warned that, in other cases, the police should come and bring him down from the stage, at his statements concerning to anti-Semitism, racism and the Shoah.

Well, I think that the work is still ahead of us, and we continue to work. And we do it, as I said at the beginning of my answer, with the different ministries, but also with the member of the Bundestag. There is not a single meeting that we have with any distinguished member of the Bundestag in which the issue of Iran is not, if not the major part of the discussion, at least the major part of our concern. We will continue to do it, but the issue of the bank is also, in a way, totally dependent on our – on the possibilities to introduce an aspect of legal nature in order to help the Germans to take a decision to close the bank.

Concerning the parliamentary group, Mr. Jerzy Montag, we discussed with him, as well – you have to remember that he’s one of the biggest parliamentary groups in the German Bundestag. I think there are 180, and maybe 120, members of all parties in this friendship establishment, parliamentary establishment. We are very proud of it and we have a good exchange with them. But that, again, does not necessarily say that we see eye-to-eye on all the issues, including the issue of Iran and our demand to increase the pace and the depth of the unilateral sanctions, on behalf of Germany, on Iran.

We will continue to do it, but in the same breath, I would like to say that the cooperation between the parliamentary group in Germany and in Israel is more than excellent. We will try to get every member – perhaps one day, all of the parliamentary group – together as a group to visit Israel. Many of them have never visited Israel, and I think it’s time to do it. And also, with all – you mentioned a member of the Bundestag – Montag – well, we have, if not daily, weekly contact with him. On major issues, we totally consent and agree.

Sometimes we disagree, and if you mention the Israel Congress in Frankfurt, well, the member of the Bundestag was on the stage, and he defended some of his views. But I think the reaction from the crowd, from the floor, was somewhat indifferent. But this is the nature of the thing. In public diplomacy, sometimes you do this, sometimes you do that. But I can say that in private, the diplomacy seems much better than sometimes it’s perceived.

MR.HEIL: The next questions are concerning anti-Semitism in Germany. German studies are showing growing hatred of Israel and modern anti-Semitism in Germany. How does Israel view Germany’s efforts to combat growing anti-Semitism? In the years after the unification, Germany witnessed several deadly attacks on foreigners.

Today, integration is a big issue for Germans, often debated on a very hostile fashion. Could attacks happen again? And the next question: How do you feel about the dying out of the German World War II generation, and what would you say are the implications for German-Israeli relations?

AMB. BEN-ZEEV: Again, I hope that I remember all of the parts of the question. I feel very bad about anti-Semitism. I can say that, unfortunately, I even witnessed Nazis marching in Dresden – not only just in Dresden – a big number of Nazis. And I say to my colleagues there in Dresden, which came from high positions, that I really feel worried. I worry not for Israel; I worry not for the Jewish community here; but I’m really worried for Germany.

And I hope that the democratic institutions in Germany are strong enough to combat this phenomena. When I am asked how I feel, I throw back to you and to others, who ask me, how do you think a proud Jew – a seventh-generation Sabra in Israel, but still, a very, very proud Jew and Israeli ambassador in Germany feels when he sees the Nazis, again, marching in the streets of Dresden, or elsewhere? I feel very, very bad.

And I know that in the office of the president of Germany, in the office of the Bundeskanzler – the chancellery - and all of the different ministries, they are not only concerned, but they are really ready to do anything to stop that ugly phenomena. And again, I’m sorry that

yesterday, we have commemorated the Pogromnacht – sometimes, in the West, they call it Kristallnacht; it's not kristall – it was Pogromnacht.

And I thought of that yesterday when I participated in a ceremony in the Jewish center here in Berlin, and when I heard all the people speaking there off the floor and the stage. And I thought to myself, that still, those issues of anti-Semitism, racism and Nazis still are, so to speak, almost legal here. It is very saddening – really, really very saddening for me. But I think also, it's a saddening warning to Germany itself.

While I know that most, so people say, of the hooligans are hooligans and they cannot distinguish between one ideology or another, that is not my concern. My concern is that sometimes, even in mainstream Germany, you hear expressions of racism and anti-Semitism, sometimes even some expressions that, 70 years ago, were put down at the end of the Second World War.

That leads me to the other question: How do I feel about the dying out? I feel that the generation is going. And again, I mentioned yesterday, the commemoration of the Pogromnacht – one of the guests at that evening yesterday was the daughter of Ernst Cramer, and Ernst Cramer was among the heroic Germans who originally moved to America, came back as an officer in the American Army. And I can say that, really, he represents so good the generation of World War II. This is the nature of things.

And my question to myself and my question to my German colleagues and my questions to intellectuals on both an intellectual and emotional level: Who is taking over, in terms of the memory? We have a memory, and I can say that Germany is in constant soul-searching of its past, unlike many other countries in Europe. There is not a single day that one is not encountering this part of the soul-searching of the Germans to their own past. But my question is not only the memory; the question is what do we do with the memory when we have the memory?

When we learn from history, and if we learn from history, what do we do with what we have learned? This is the question. This is a deep question. And I'm sure that the Germans, both on the intellectual level and also on the political level, deal with this. But again, this is a question that is certainly very, very much in these nights that I have – sleepless nights – because of those phenomena.

MR.HEIL: The last question we received comes from the Israel correspondent of the newspaper Die Zeit.

AMB. BEN-ZEEV: Can you repeat, please? I didn't hear the last question.

MR.HEIL: It comes from the Israel correspondent of Die Zeit.

AMB. BEN-ZEEV: Oh, Die Zeit, okay. The correspondent in Israel?

MR.HEIL: Yes, in Israel. The question is: Concerning Israeli-German relations, what do you think about the trend of young Israelis going to Berlin to study, work and live there nowadays?

AMB. BEN-ZEEV: Well, I think that by passing, I mentioned that I'm a seventh-generation Israeli, and while for me, there is only one country for Israelis and for Jews, and it is Israel, but nowadays, I don't think that anybody can dictate to others what to do, how to do and where to live.

I can say that only, again, my experience is that the quality of the people that – the Israelis that are visiting Berlin, in terms of the cultural message that they bring, is tremendous. By the way, I think that per capita, the Israeli tourism to Germany constitutes the biggest group of tourists in the world. If you take out the EU tourism to Germany and the American tourism, Israelis are number three – about 50,000 to 55,000 of them every year. Berlin becomes attractive – a center of activities to so many Israelis – musicians, arts, students, et cetera. I welcome them very much here, and I call them to maintain relations with us and through us, with Israel.

I don't know that many of them stay. I know that some of them study here. I know that there is a great impact in a number of fields, like in music and in art. And we are very, very proud of it. We'd like to see a reciprocal movement of young Germans to Israel. We're working very, very hard on it. There are many thousands of Germans who are visiting Israel. This is, part of the way, part of the bilateral exchanges between the two foreign ministers – how to increase the quality and the quantity of tourism on both sides.

I think that every single tourist brings a message with him. I hope the message is positive, but the exposure of one in a different culture is positive and can be positive. And I think that there are very deep and historical ties between German culture and Jewish and Israeli culture. Some of it comes to expression in Germany, a few events or so come to expression in Israel in the field of music, in the field of art, as well.

I can say that, as an anecdote, only about, I don't know, two or three weeks ago, I visited the opera here, "Don Giovanni," and I met a group of Israelis. They recognized me and they came over and I asked them, what are you doing here? And they said, we came on a flight on Friday and we're going back to Israel on Sunday. We just came to enjoy the German opera, "Don Giovanni." So you know, I think this exchange is very healthy into the injection into the relations between us – between Israel and Germany.

Let me say that we have created, as of two years ago – a foundation was established between the two presidents – the president of Israel and the president of Germany – and it's called the fund for the future. And I can say as a member of the board, I can say that most of our activities are concentrated in exchange of views, exchange of young people, exchange of ideas, exchange of intellectual relations, exchange of science, et cetera. And that makes me very, very happy.

And I think this is, in a way – not directly, and maybe not massively – a direct answer to the previous question that troubles me so much about racism and anti-Semitism in Germany.

Before closing, just answering you on the last part of your question, I remember that I didn't answer the question of integration. Certainly, in the last few months, the issue of integration really took off in Germany.

It is, as you may know, widely discussed in the media. It is widely discussed in different forums. It is discussed in the Bundestag. It has been discussed, really, all over. I, myself, participated in such discussed by giving an interview here. And I can share with you, for whatever it's worth it or not, the only view that I can say when I see and witness these discussions, that in my country, everything – there is almost no taboos on the issue, and the issue of integration is one of the issues that has been so openly discussed in Israel.

And maybe the fact that it is also being discussed in Germany can open the valve and maybe it can be the vent, as they say in German, to the pressures. And I hope that this really would never glide into the issues of racism and anti-Semitism. So if there are any questions, I'll be glad to answer, and if not, I have to say that I enjoyed listening to myself. Because I really don't hear the journalists themselves; I can hear them through a mediator.

But again, let me invite you, first of all, to make a trip to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and then maybe Berlin. And then maybe we can even further discuss issues that are so important to Israel, and I think also so important to Germany. And as a witness to this discussion this afternoon, I suppose it is also important to the media.

MR.HEIL: Well, thank you so much to our guest, the ambassador, for taking the time to join us. Thank all of you, our guests who participated in today's call. I'd like to remind everyone that there are lists of expert resources for background information on our website, www.theisraelproject.org. As always, if there's anything The Israel Project can do to help you get the facts and resources you need to cover Israel and the Middle East, please do not hesitate to contact us. Ambassador, thank you so much.

AMB. BEN-ZEEV: Thank you, gentlemen.

(END)