

Analysis Merkel Wants to Talk High-tech in Israel, but Iran and Palestinians May Dampen Mood

The German chancellor is in Israel hoping to improve economic ties between the two countries. But a Bedouin village and the Gaza Strip could cast a large shadow over proceedings this week.



Merkel and the Netanyahu's at their home, October 3, 2018. Kobi Gideon/GPO

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel releases a video podcast every Saturday morning that sets the political agenda for the week. There was little subtlety in her latest message at the weekend: Posing in front of the Israeli flag, wearing a blue jacket that matches the Star of David, she very candidly outlines what she would like to focus on during the Israeli-German government talks, starting in Jerusalem on Wednesday evening: economic cooperation in the high-tech sector.

Some of her words are even printed on the screen as she states them: "Special responsibility for relationship with Israel," for example, and "strong cooperation in research and development." A "clear position against anti-Semitism" is another.

Merkel is bringing the newly appointed commissioner against anti-Semitism, Dr.

Felix Klein, with her. She is also travelling with a very large delegation of high-profile businesspeople, all eager to explore and invest more in Israeli high-tech and talent. High-tech development is Merkel's biggest concern in her final term as chancellor.

But as much as she wants to shift the focus onto economic issues, the German media has highlighted different subjects in advance of the government talks - and these mostly relate to another phrase that featured in Merkel's podcast: "Support for two-state solution."



Bedouin children from Khan al-Ahmar holds posters of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Palestinian flags in front of the German representative office, Ramallah, West Bank, October 3, 2018. Nasser Nasser, AP

An image of young Palestinians has made the news in Germany this week: Children from the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar in the West Bank are seen holding posters of Merkel and "want to ask her in person for her help" to save their home, reports news weekly Der Spiegel.

The German Foreign Office issued a statement back in May emphasizing its "grave concern" regarding Israel's planned demolition of the village - in particular as it suspects there are plans "to enlarge the settlement of Kfar Adumim, which is in close proximity to Khan al-Ahmar." Ever since, the Bedouin village and potential settlement-building has been a hot topic in both the German media and political debates.

German NGOs like Medico International, which is partially funded by the German Foreign Ministry, are still active in the village and have become mouthpieces for its citizens. In an open protest letter, the German branch of European Jews for a Just Peace pushed the German government to put pressure on the Israeli government to uphold "international law and human rights," stressing that Germany can criticize the Netanyahu government precisely because the two countries have a "particularly close relationship."

Open criticism of Israel is still taboo among mainstream German politicians. But

the government did sign a joint statement with other European Union states and the European Parliament condemning the demolition and further settlement building in the West Bank.

In addition, the situation on the border of the Gaza Strip is an almost daily topic on German news, usually focusing on the humanitarian situation of Palestinians in the enclave. Rocket attacks on Israeli border towns are rarely mentioned.

“We will also talk about the complex security situation,” Merkel said in her video podcast, keeping it vague. It is well-known that she is highly critical of further settlement building in the West Bank, and that this was reportedly the issue that led to the cancellation of the last planned set of talks between the two governments in 2017.

Relations between the two countries took a turn for the worse in April 2017, when Germany’s then-foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel – also head of the Social Democratic Party at the time – caused a diplomatic crisis. Gabriel had met with Israeli rights groups Breaking the Silence and B’Tselem while visiting Israel. Those meetings prompted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to cancel a meeting with Gabriel in protest.

The German stood by his decision, stating: “The Israeli prime minister wanted to force me to cancel a meeting with respectable Israeli citizens, because they criticize his policies against Palestinians. It is not only our point of view that Israel is violating international law with its settlement policy and is blocking the peace process. The policies of the Netanyahu government are highly controversial in Israel, too. Therefore it is only natural for me to listen to his critics.”

Merkel stood by her foreign minister at the time, not least because she was in the middle of an election campaign.

With the formation of her new cabinet in March, relationships with Israel have improved once more: In contrast to his predecessor, the new German foreign minister, Heiko Maas (also a Social Democrat), is an openly strong, pro-Israel supporter. Even so, last week he announced an additional 100 million euros (\$115 million) of German support for UNRWA – the UN agency for Palestinian refugees – at the UN General Assembly.

All of this makes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the focus of German-Israeli

relations at a time when Merkel would prefer other topics to take center stage. Germany, still a strong supporter of the Iran nuclear deal – another contentious topic between the two governments – had to state that the nuclear deal is not as beneficial to the German economy as had been expected. Even before the latest U.S. sanctions hit, German trade in Iran reached a volume of only 3.5 billion euros in 2017, instead of the 10 billion euros previously projected by the Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

Many of the top businesspeople accompanying Merkel to Israel have already withdrawn their economic interests from Iran. They are now looking for other opportunities in the Middle East. It is not by accident that the topic of Wednesday night's talks is "Economy, Innovation, Technology – Strengthening and Enlarging our Relationship."

It is unlikely that the German position toward the Iran nuclear deal will change. But the economic opportunities for German businesses in Israeli high-tech – and the fact that Merkel is keen to leave a German startup and high-tech scene as her legacy – gives the Israeli government some leverage concerning Tehran.

After all, as Merkel said in her latest podcast, in front of that Israeli flag, "We can learn so much here in so many different areas."

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Source: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-merkel-wants-to-talk-high-tech-in-israel-but-iran-and-palestinians-may-lower-mood-1.6529099>

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