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*Israel's Eastern Mediterranean Strategy:  
Energy, Security And Geopolitical Balances*

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**ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE****GERMANY'S SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH  
ISRAEL AND THE RECENT GAZA WAR**

Müge AKNUR\*  
İbrahim SAYLAN\*\*

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**Abstract**

German foreign policy towards Israel has been shaped by its historical and moral responsibility stemming from the Holocaust, with German governments creating a special relationship with Israel as a fundamental aspect of the post-war German national role conception. Germany has also assigned itself the role of a protector of Israel and committed to ensuring Israel's security as a component of Germany's reason of state (Staatsraison). Although this support has not been absolute or limitless and Germany has, as a founding member of European Union, aligned its foreign policies with other European countries, this special relationship has nonetheless significantly influenced German foreign policy, particularly concerning the Palestine-Israel conflict. The catastrophic Gaza war that started in October 2023 has once again tested Germany's special relationship with Israel. Despite substantial casualties on the Palestinian side,

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Germany has given strong support to Israel by affirming its right to self-defense, endorsing Israel in UN resolutions, increasing its arms exports to Israel, and supporting Israel in the international arena. However, these policies have jeopardized Germany's international image and provoked extensive criticisms of moral and strategic blindness. This article seeks to analyze the impact of the special relationship and Staatsraison on Germany's foreign policy towards the recent Gaza war, using Kalevi Holsti's (1970) national role conception as a conceptual framework. While not unconditional and unlimited, the recent Gaza War demonstrates that Germany's special relationship with Israel, which has been strengthened and deepened over decades, remains intact, even in the face of harsh criticism.

**Keywords:** German Foreign Policy, German-Israeli Relations, Staatsraison, Gaza War, National Role Conception

## **Almanya'nın İsrail ile Özel İlişkisi ve Son Gazze Savaşı**

### **Öz**

Almanya'nın İsrail'e yönelik dış politikası, Holokost'tan kaynaklanan tarihi ve ahlaki sorumluluğuyla şekillenmiş olup, İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası dönemde Alman hükümetleri Alman ulusal rol anlayışının temel bir unsuru olarak İsrail ile özel bir ilişki kurmuştur. Almanya, ayrıca kendisine İsrail'in koruyucusu rolünü üstlenmiş ve Alman devletinin varlık gerekçelerinden biri (Staatsraison) olarak İsrail'in güvenliğini sağlamayı taahhüt etmiştir. Aslında Almanya'nın İsrail'e bu desteği şartsız veya sınırsız değildir ve Almanya, Avrupa Birliği'nin kurucu üyesi olarak dış politikalarını diğer Avrupa ülkeleriyle uyumlu hale getirmiştir. Ancak tüm bunlara rağmen, İsrail ile bu özel ilişkisi Almanya'nın dış politikasını, özellikle Filistin-İsrail çatışmasına yönelik dış politikasını önemli ölçüde etkilemiştir. Ekim 2023'te başlayan felaket niteliğindeki Gazze savaşı, Almanya'nın İsrail ile olan özel ilişkisini bir kez daha test etmiştir. Filistin halkının uğradığı önemli kayıplara rağmen, Almanya, İsrail'in kendini savunma hakkını onaylayarak, BM kararlarında İsrail'i destekleyerek, İsrail'e silah ihracatını artırarak ve uluslararası platformda İsrail'i destekleyerek İsrail'e güçlü bir destek vermiştir. Ancak, bu politikalar Almanya'nın uluslararası imajını tehlikeye atmış ve Almanya'ya yönelik ahlaki ve stratejik körlük eleştirilerini artırmıştır. Bu makale, Kalevi Holsti'nin (1970) ulusal rol anlayışını kavramsal bir çerçeve olarak kullanarak, Almanya'nın İsrail ile özel ilişkisinin ve Staatsraison'un

Almanya'nın son Gazze savaşına yönelik dış politikası üzerindeki etkisini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Koşulsuz ve sınırsız olmasa da, son Gazze Savaşı, Almanya'nın İsrail ile on yıllar boyunca güçlenen ve derinleşen özel ilişkisinin sert eleştiriler karşısında bile son derece sağlam olduğunu göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Alman Dış Politikası, Almanya-İsrail ilişkileri, Staatsraison, Gazze Savaşı, Ulusal Rol Algısı

## Introduction

The most recent Gaza conflict, which broke out on October 7, 2023, was provoked by a Hamas attack on Israel that killed over 1,200 Israelis. This led to Israeli retaliatory strikes on the Gaza strip that have killed over 50,000 Palestinians. In sharp contrast to European countries' united policies in the war in Ukraine, the Gaza crisis has significantly undermined European solidarity and again demonstrated how European Union (EU) member states' policies concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict diverge. Among these countries, Germany, by basing its relations with Israel on the principle of *Staatsraison*, has set itself the role of consistently supporting Israel's right to self-defense.

German foreign policy has been shaped by the moral burdens of World War II and political constraints on the sovereignty of the post-war German state. Given that Germany is a founding member of the EU, the historical evolution of its foreign policy has interacted with European foreign policy since the establishment of European Political Community (EPC) in the early 1970s (Müller, 2011). In post-World War II politics, Germany defined itself as a civilian power (Demirtaş & Mazlum, 2018) while also developing a special relationship with Israel that was crucially shaped by its historical and moral obligation over the Holocaust.

This approach has profoundly influenced Germany's conflict resolution strategy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while its special relationship with Israel has been tested during a series of Arab-Israeli conflicts since Israel was established in 1948. In particular, the latest Gaza War has severely challenged German foreign policy, both normatively and practically. Since the conflict's first day, despite the significant rise in casualties in Gaza, Germany has strongly supported Israel and asserted its right to self-defense. While German politicians described Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a war of annihilation and genocide, in the case of Palestine, they have not levelled such accusations at Israel's violence in Gaza. Moreover, the German government abstained from the UN Resolutions of October 27<sup>th</sup> 2023 and

December 12<sup>th</sup> 2023, which respectively called for a humanitarian cease-fire and the unconditional release of all hostages. Even at the UN Human Rights Council, Germany opposed a resolution to prevent all weapons sales to Israel due to its close bilateral ties to Israel's arms industry. Indeed, since October 7, arms exports from Germany to Israel have increased almost ten-fold (Schneider & Grimm, 2024).

Germany's ongoing support for Israel, in the face of radical right-wing Netanyahu government's relentless military retaliation for Hamas' terrorist attacks, has led to criticisms of strategic and moral blindness in German foreign policy. Moreover, Germany's pro-Israeli foreign policy has significant implications for European normative and geopolitical power in the Middle East (Konecny, 2024; Schneider, 2023).

Given this context, this article analyzes Germany's pro-Israeli foreign policy in the ongoing Gaza War and frames Germany's relations with Israel by drawing on Kalevi Holsti's (1970) role theory and the national role conception approach. Role theory argues that decision makers see and assign particular roles to their countries, and then act in accordance with the demands and expectations these roles generate. We argue that Germany, under the deep impact of historical and moral burden of the Holocaust, has assigned itself a role as Israel's protector. This role conception has then shaped German foreign policy towards Israel in the current Gaza war. Despite an increasing tendency to return to realism and power in current foreign policy frameworks, Germany's foreign policy towards Israel seems to be substantially shaped by historically established national role conceptions. By considering this national role conception as an independent variable, our analysis aims to explain the nature, historical development, and limitations of Germany's special relationship with Israel, with a particular emphasis on the latest Gaza War. To analyze Germany's special relationship with Israel within the broader context of "national role conception", the article will examine discourses and actions of German political leaders by focusing on their decisions, policies and public statements.

The article first introduces the theoretical framework concerning the impact of national role conception on foreign policy. Second, it considers Germany's national role conception and its special relationship with Israel. Third, after explaining the historical background of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it analyzes German foreign policy towards the current Gaza War. Fourth, it evaluates the continued relevance of the role theory in explaining German national foreign policy during this conflict. Finally, it identifies the implications of Germany's special

relationship with Israel for German foreign policy at both national and European levels.

### **Theoretical Framework: Role Theory and National Role Conception**

Foreign policy can be briefly defined as the general direction a government takes towards the outside world. This foreign policy direction can be shaped by people's sense of national identity, as well as the nation's interests, objectives, roles, and values (Howell, 1997). Foreign policy analysts analyze the factors that shape foreign policy and identify the causes of a state's actions. In foreign policy analysis, the primary actors can be both states and non-state players (Rosenau, 1990). Foreign policy is shaped by both domestic and international challenges. Therefore, both internal and external actors can affect a state's foreign policy. In his two-level analysis, Robert Putnam (1988) considers domestic groups as players exerting pressure on the government to promote their interests and governments as actors following certain policies to maximize their country's national interests. Similarly, Carlsnaes (1992) defines foreign policy as an interaction between certain actors considered as agency and the environment considered as structure.

Because it lacks a unifying theory or approach, foreign policy analysis remains ambiguous. While some scholars such as Waltz (2001) and Singer (1961) concentrate on specific levels of analysis, such as foreign policy decision-making at the individual, state, or international level, others focus on external (international) and internal (domestic) and psychological and operational environments in foreign policy-making (Rosenau, 1972). Some scholars analyze foreign policy decision-making through international relations theories and approaches, such as realism, liberalism and constructivism, while simultaneously incorporating domestic factors like public opinion, societal groups, government organizations, and leaders (Kaarbo, Lantis & Beasley, 2012). However, one common characteristic of these diverse foreign policy approaches is their emphasis on internal/domestic variables alongside psychological and sociological environment.

In this context, Holsti's (1970) role theory examines national role conceptions and explains their impact on the international behavior of states, particularly through the role of decision-makers. According to role theory, decision makers perceive and assign specific roles to their nations and then behave in ways that meet the needs and expectations these roles create. In this framework, the focus goes from realist foreign

policy analysis that concentrates on power to a social constructivist approaches in which scholars focus on how the decision-makers perceive the reality. This move from realism to social constructivism throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s in international relations theories and foreign policy analysis approaches was significant as it emphasized the role of norms and ideas in shaping nations' collective consciousness and national identity. Following this trend Holsti's role theory also argued that the perceptions of the decision-makers concerning their state's role in the international arena affected the state's foreign policy decisions. Holsti was ahead of his time. His approach was not appreciated in the 1970s. However, throughout 2000s or so, there has been a renewed interest on role theory. Role theory started to provide an attractive framework for scholars to comprehend the foreign policies of a diverse range of nations, small states that encounter substantial limitations on their capacity to operate in the international sphere (Breuning, 2017).

Role theory has commonalities with Kenneth Waltz and David Singer's levels of analysis in two ways. First, role theory has similarities with the individual level of analysis, which focuses on psychological and sociological factors rather than rationality. Second, it has strong parallels with state/internal level analysis, which concentrates on the national role conceptions of ruling elites among other factors (Neack, 2008; Breuning, 2007). Similarly, the psychological environment of James Rosenau et al.'s framework, which includes policy-makers' perceptions, images, assumptions, and expectations, is consistent with the national role conception of politicians (Rosenau, 1972; Snyder, Bruck & Sapin, 1962; Sprout & Sprout, 1969). More specifically, the constructivism of Kaarbo et al.'s (2012) foreign policy analysis framework is directly connected with the national role conception in that it emphasizes the significance of the norms and ideas that are considered as part of a nation's collective consciousness and linked to its ideas of national identity.

In using role theory analysis to categorize state behaviors Holsti focuses on three concepts: role prescription (expectation), role performance, and role conceptions. Holsti (1970, p. 239) defines role prescriptions as "the norms and expectations that societies, institutions, or groups attach to particular positions." He argues that these arise from external sources like the international system. Potential sources include "system-wide values; general legal principles, ... and the rules, traditions, and expectations of states as expressed in the charters of international and regional organizations, ... multilateral and

bilateral treaties ... and less formal or implicit commitments” (Holsti, 1970, p. 246).

Role performance refers to the perceptions of decision-makers that affect their execution of expected roles to reach their desired position in the international arena. Holsti defines role performance as the general foreign policy behavior of governments. It includes patterns of attitudes, decisions, responses, functions and commitments toward other states. Role performance of the decision maker is also affected by social and cultural values and traditions (Holsti, 1970, pp. 245-246).

Role conceptions include “the policymakers’ own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules, and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or subordinate regional systems” (Holsti, 1970, pp. 245-246). Holsti argues that a state’s foreign policy is shaped by its national role conception, which helps clarify the general direction of foreign policy decisions. He further asserts that role conceptions represent the image of the state’s appropriate orientations or functions toward the external environment. He maintains that role conception is a byproduct of nation’s socialization process and shaped by its history, culture, and societal characteristics. Holsti argues that as these national role conceptions become an increasingly significant component of the political culture, they are more likely to impose limits on perceived or politically achievable policy options and prevent idiosyncratic variables from significantly influencing decision-making (Holsti, 1987, pp. 38-39). He claims that varying role conceptions can explain differences in foreign policy behavior. To understand the diverse national role conceptions in different countries, he proposes examining various sources, such as “location and major topographical features of the state; natural, economic and technical resources; available capabilities; traditional policies; socio-economic demands and needs as expressed through political parties, mass movements, or interest groups; national values, doctrines, or ideologies; public opinion ‘mood’; and the personality or political needs of key policy-makers” (Holsti, 1970, p. 246). He emphasizes the significance of establishing connections between national role conceptions and these variables across different states.

Holsti identifies 17 national role conceptions for states, which they perform in the international system, namely bastion of revolution-liberator, regional leader, regional protector, active independent, liberation supporter, anti-imperialist actor, defender of the faith, mediator-integrator, regional sub-system collaborator, developer, bridge, faithful ally, independent,

example, internal development, isolate, and protectee (Holsti, 1970, pp. 260-272). Although Germany's national role conception in foreign policy does not exactly match any of these conceptions, Holsti's theoretical framework can still help in analyzing German foreign policy, both generally and regarding its special relationship with Israel, particularly during the current Gaza War.

### **Germany's National Role Conception and Its Special Relationship with Israel**

Following World War II, Germany constructed its national role conception in foreign policy as a civilian power. Maull (1990, pp. 92-93) identifies three aspects of civilian power: prioritizing cooperation in foreign relations; abstaining from military means in foreign diplomacy; and consolidating their authority to create supranational institutions. These characteristics align closely with post-war Germany's national role conception. Regarding national identity, Germany adopted the principle of "Never on Our Own" while discrediting the expansionist and militaristic characteristics of Nazi Germany, thereby demonstrating that it preferred cooperation over acting alone. Moreover, as a civilian power, Germany established itself as an actor strongly dedicated to international law and human rights in international relations. Finally, Germany has deliberately preferred non-military means. Krotz and Schramm (2021, p. 12) assert that post-war Germany's national role conception is founded on and reflected through notions of "responsibility, predictability, calculability, reliability, stability, accountability, and continuity".

Since the end of the Cold War, however, Germany has been forced to revise its civilian power role and associated foreign policies due to multiple crises in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and in the Middle East. In 1999, for example, Germany signaled a major foreign policy shift by using military force internationally for the first time since World War II, when it participated in NATO air operations against Serbia as a humanitarian intervention. Then, in 2002, Germany participated in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. Although this was established as a stabilization force to work in infrastructure construction, German forces became involved in military combat in 2007 after the Taliban intensified its attacks on national and international forces in Afghanistan. In 2015, Germany sent soldiers to provide military surveillance in the anti-ISIS coalition in Syria. Thus, in response to the changing global system, Germany's foreign policy has evolved from being a civilian power to a "realist civilian power" that combines morality with hard

power. In other words, Germany foreign policy has been normalized in that, like other states, it now uses military means when necessary (Demirtaş & Mazlum, 2018).

As one of the EU's founding members, Germany has included a European dimension in its national role conception in foreign policy. Hence, since the creation of the European Political Community (EPC) in the early 1970s, German foreign policy has been closely linked to European foreign policy. In order to better achieve its foreign policy objectives, Germany relied first on the EPC and then on the Common Security and Defense Policy (CFSP). This European cooperation has shaped German foreign policy (Müller, 2011). As explained below, its special relationship with Israel has particularly influenced Germany's contribution to developing European conflict resolution policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

One of the distinct characteristics of post-war German foreign policy has been its special relationship with Israel. Germany, holding itself responsible for the atrocities it committed against Jews and others during WWII, established a strong relationship with Israel by safeguarding Israel's security from external threats. This relationship has had particular implications for Germany's national role conception both nationally and internationally, particularly concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Germany's contribution to resolving this conflict. In particular, the notion of "Never Again Auschwitz" has played a key role in shaping Germany's post-war national identity (Demirtaş & Mazlum: 2018, p. 39). Consequently, Germany has committed itself to preserving Israel as a Jewish and democratic state to the extent that it is considered a reason of state (*Staatsraison*) (Ben Aharon, 2023). Indeed, Germany's first post-war Chancellor,<sup>1</sup> Konrad Adenauer, emphasized the importance of maintaining good relations with Israel to help internationally legitimize the newly-established German state and re-integrate it with the West (Müller, 2011, p. 389).

Although modern Germany was founded in 1949, it did not begin diplomatic relations with Israel until 1960, when Adenauer met Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion in New York (deutschland.de, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Germany's special relationship with Israel showed itself through the provision of weapons, the facilitation of knowledge exchange and new technology, and cooperation on intelligence sharing (Ben Aharon, 2023). After signing a reparations agreement (the Luxembourg Agreement) in 1952, Germany paid 3,450 million Deutschmark-DM (820 million dollars) to Israel to assist with resettling a significant number of immigrants (Honig, 1954).<sup>3</sup> During the mid-1960s,

diplomatic relations strengthened while German companies started working on the construction projects in Israel. Germany further deepened cultural relations and education policy by focusing on cultural, media, and civil society exchanges while also establishing long-standing partnerships in science and research (Federal Foreign Office, 2024). Strong relations have continued throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War period. However, while Germany's special relationship with Israel has shaped its foreign policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this has not prevented Germany from advocating a two-state solution to promote peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians.

### **German Foreign Policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

Conflict between Palestinians and Jews in the territory that became Israel started following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and the subsequent establishment of the British mandate administration in Palestine. Under British rule, the number of Jews living in Palestine increased dramatically. Then, war broke out between Palestinians and Israelis after Israel was established in May 1948 on territory historically inhabited by Palestinians. Other Arab countries supported Palestinians in their struggle for self-determination, resulting in a series of Arab-Israeli Wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1982, turning this into one of the longest-lasting and most destructive conflicts in modern history.

Guided by the United States of America (USA) and the United Nations (UN), successive attempts have been made since the late 1970s to establish peace between the Palestinian Authority and Israel as well as between Arab states and Israel. These include the Camp David Accords, signed between Egypt and Israel in 1978; the Middle East Process, initiated by the USA and facilitated by the UN, Russia, and EU members, which led to the Declaration of Principles in Oslo in 1993 whereby Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) agreed to mutual recognition; the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 as part of the Oslo Accords peace agreement; the Washington Declaration signed between Jordan and Israel in 1994; Camp David Middle East Peace Summit in 2000 between PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. However, these efforts have failed to prevent further conflict between the two sides.<sup>4</sup> Particularly since the mid-2000s, Israeli attacks on Gaza have dramatically increased with breaking points in June 2006, December 2008, July-August 2014, March 2018,

May 2021, and August 2022, killing thousands of Palestinians. Most Israeli strikes have been launched in retaliation for Hamas' attacks on Israeli territory or soldiers.

Thus, after briefly outlining critical turning in the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, we can now assess Germany's special relationship with Israel in the context of these conflicts and conflict resolution efforts in order to explain Germany's foreign policy during the most recent Gaza War. During the course of the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, Germany's special relationship with Israel has proved resilient at each critical juncture. Germany has understandably pursued its national interest while striving to strengthen its special relationship with Israel in various spheres. In turn, this stance has shaped Germany's contribution to European conflict resolution. The following analysis of historical development of Germany's special relationship with Israel clearly shows how this relationship has deepened over time.

The 1967 Arab Israeli War resulted in Israeli taking control of the West Bank from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. Despite Germany's neutral policy and Chancellor Willy Brandt's call for regional peace, the German government provided Israel with gas masks and medical equipment throughout this war. Moreover, the German government secretly permitted American arms transfers to Israel via Germany. Compared to Arab countries in the region, Israel consistently received credits and "preferential treatment" in commerce from Germany (Kathrin-Kreft, 2010, 38). Shapiro (2003, 310) notes that the German-Israeli military and intelligence cooperation contributed to Israel's military successes in 1967, 1973, and 1982. Moreover, German public sympathy for Israel increased when this small country managed to defeat a group of larger Arab countries. In the following years, Palestinian attacks on international targets, including the 1972 Munich Olympics, Lufthansa plane hijackings, and Israeli civilians, aroused anxiety in Germany (Reinicke, 2002: pp. 78-79). Brandt's visit as the first German chancellor to travel to Israel in 1973 and his definition of relations as "normal relations with special character" marked a new stage in German-Israeli relations (deutschland.de, 2016).

Müller (2011, p. 385) correctly states that Germany's special relationship with Israel and its broader interests in Middle East stability have made the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a significant feature of German foreign policy. Germany started to follow a "policy of even-handedness" when the energy crisis of early 1970s started (Fischer, 2019, p. 30). That is, while keeping Israel at the center of its foreign policy, it adopted a more

balanced position toward the conflict. Furthermore, due to the changing European foreign policy framework related to EC declarations, it was easier for Germany to address Arab concerns and promote Palestinian rights. In its 1980 Venice Declaration, for example, the EC pressed Israel to comply with UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. The Declaration described Israeli settlements in the occupied territories as illegal and called for Palestinian self-determination. In June 1982, just before an Israeli incursion into Lebanon, German Foreign Minister Dietrich Genscher visited Israel and stressed Germany's special responsibility for Israel by stating that Germany's ratification of the Declaration was not a move against Israel. He claimed that Germany supported Palestinian self-determination in order to maintain regional peace and Israel's security (Kathrin-Kreft, 2010, p.50).

Following the Venice Declaration, Germany declined to follow France in initiating official relations with the PLO after the PLO refused to recognize Israel (Kirişci, 1986). Throughout the 1980s, the Palestinians' growing dissatisfaction with Israel's military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip culminated in the first Palestinian *intifada* between 1987 and 1989. While the EC pursued a pro-Palestinian policy during the UN sessions that supported the PLO's legitimacy, Germany adopted a pro-Israeli position (Lindeman, 1988). During this period, the EPC framework allowed Germany to support Palestinian self-determination, PLO peace settlements, and the EC's calls for the internationalization of Jerusalem. However, these pro-Palestinian positions did not affect Germany's special relationship with Israel. Rather, Germany continued to act as Israel's reliable partner in Europe while Israel maintained its central place in Germany's Middle East foreign policy (Müller, 2011, p. 391).

The end of the Cold War brought about significant changes in Germany's political status, Europe's foreign policy structure, and the Middle East Peace Process: Germany attained reunification and full sovereignty in 1990; the EC became the EU; and the Maastricht Treaty created the CFSP, through which the EU hoped to play a greater role in world politics. In the US-led Middle East Process initiated in Madrid in 1991, Germany aligned with the USA and EU to support the EU's economic peacemaking approach by concentrating on economic and development aid. Hence, Germany became the leading European donor to the Palestinians, providing over half a billion Euros to support the development of the Palestinian economy and infrastructure. Germany was also the first EU country to open a representative office in the Palestinian territories. At the same

time, however, while supporting a two-state solution, Germany opposed any political or economic EU sanctions against Israel. In summary, during the 1990s Germany was a major proponent of strengthening EU relations with both sides but particularly with Israel (Müller, 2011, pp. 393-394).

Recognizing the EU as a significant actor in the Middle East Peace Process, the Quartet consisting of the UN, USA, Russia, and the EU, was established in 2002 to help mediate between Israel and the PA and support Palestine's infrastructural and institutional capacity on its way to statehood. According to Holsti's terminology, Germany has assumed the "developer" role while undertaking special duties in Palestine. Meanwhile, German-Israeli relations continued to deepen through many official visits between the two countries. More significantly, in 2008, they started holding joint cabinet meetings alternately in Berlin and Jerusalem every year or two (Asseburg, 2015, pp. 1-2). In 2005, Germany's political elites began to use the term *Staatsraison* (reason of state) to define Germany's special relationship with Israel. For example, Rudolf Dressler, German ambassador to Israel, wrote an essay titled "Israel's Secured Existence—A Part of the German Reason of State". In it, Dressler emphasized Germany's special responsibility for ensuring Israel's right to exist in peace and security. This term then became a catchphrase among Germany's political elites, particularly under Chancellor Angela Merkel between 2006 and 2021 (Aruch, 2013. p. 50).

2006 marked a critical breaking point in the Middle East peace process. Germany supported the joint US-Israeli isolation policy against the Hamas-led government in Palestine after Hamas (*Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmiyyah*) refused to recognize or cooperate with Israel. After 2006, Hamas' governing role caused the peace process to rapidly lose momentum, leading to a resurgence of violence. In the first Gaza War between Israel and Hamas (2008-2009), both the German and Czech governments defended Israel's military actions on the basis of Israel's legitimate right to defend itself (Müller, 2011: 397). Then, when Israeli forces harshly suppressed protests in the Gaza Strip in 2021, German Chancellor Merkel again referred to Israel's right to self-defense (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, p. 66).

This review of the historical evolution of Germany's special relationship with Israel and its position regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict suggests the following conclusions. First, Germany's post-war national role conception has fostered its special relationship with Israel as one of the main pillars of German foreign policy. This position is also evident in Germany's contribution to developing Europe's conflict resolution policy

regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Second, Germany has occasionally used European foreign policy to protect its own national interests in the Middle East from adverse consequences stemming from its special relationship with Israel, while simultaneously serving as a key actor in building closer ties between the EU and Israel. Third, Germany has embraced the EU's two-state solution policy, although the coexistence of the special relationship and two-state policy has sometimes created significant normative and practical tensions in German foreign policy. This uneasy combination due to Germany's national role conception and its regional interests has been tested again by the 2023 Gaza War.

### **The Gaza War and German Foreign Policy within the Framework of *Staatsraison***

The most recent Gaza War started on October 7, 2023, when Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) launched a coordinated land, sea, and air assault on Israel from the Gaza Strip. The attackers killed 1,200 people and took over 250 people hostage (BBC, 2025). Hamas, which had been established in 1987 by radical members of the Muslim Brotherhood and religious factions within the PLO, aimed to drive Israeli forces out of the occupied territories and establish an Islamic state within historical Palestine to replace Israel. After gaining complete control over Gaza in 2007, Hamas had resumed its attacks against Israel in response to Israel's security operations at the al-Aqsa Mosque compound and the establishment of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank.

The day after the Hamas attacks, Israel declared itself to be in a state of war and launched air strikes and ground attacks in the Gaza Strip during the following weeks. On October 9, the Israeli government ordered a complete siege of Gaza and advised northern Gaza's residents to evacuate. Since then, as of March 2025, Israeli attacks have killed more than 50,000 Palestinians (Bennett, 2025). In July and August 2024, the course of the conflict shifted after Israeli forces involved Lebanon by attacking Beirut. On January 15, 2025, Israel and Hamas took the first steps towards ending the 15-month war by agreeing to a ceasefire in Gaza and the exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners (Bazail-Eimil, Stokols, Toosi, 2025). On January 19, 2025, a ceasefire agreement was mediated by Egypt and Qatar with assistance from the USA.

Over six rounds of hostage-prisoner exchanges in January and February 2025, Hamas released 16 Israeli, one Russian-Israeli, one Argentinian Israeli and one American Israeli

and five Thai hostages while the Israeli government released 1,135 Palestinian prisoners and allowed 50 wounded and sick Palestinians to leave Gaza for medical treatment. In the seventh and eighth releases, Hamas handed nine bodies and six hostages to Israeli government (Kingsley & Boxerman, 2025; Xinhuanet, 2025; American Jewish Committee, 2025). Due to the two sides' disagreement over the three phases of a ceasefire that would result in the war's definitive end, Israel's complete withdrawal from Gaza, and the release of all remaining Israeli hostages held by Hamas, by mid-March 2025, Israel has resumed massive attacks in Gaza, killing hundreds of Palestinians (Burke, 2025).

Since the outbreak of the Gaza War, Germany has consistently supported Israel. In the early days of the war, both Germany's coalition government, comprising Social Democrats, Greens, and Free Democrats, and the opposition parties, including the conservative Christian Democratic Union and populist radical right Alternative for Deutschland, all expressed support for Israel (Kampfner, 2023). German foreign policy regarding the war was clearly shaped by its role conception, which considers Germany to be Israel's protector.

On October 17, 2023, German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, became the first Western leader to visit Israel. During his visit, Scholz asserted that Israel had "every right to defend itself" (Kampfner, 2023) and openly reiterated Germany's role conception by emphasizing key historical facts and the German state's official ideology. He stated that, due to the Holocaust, Germany had a moral responsibility to support and defend the state of Israel (Gençtürk, 2023): "At the moment, there is only one place for Germany. A place alongside Israel. This is what we mean when we say: Israel's security is Germany's *staatsraison*" (Ruck, 2024). He also recalled that every federal government and chancellor before him had been committed to Germany's special historical responsibility for Israel's security. He pointed out that, as the German Chancellor, he would never consider Israel's security to be negotiable (Benner, 2023). Through this statement, Scholz clearly revealed German's position on the Gaza War within the context of the international system. While Scholz was interested in respecting international law over power in the Ukraine War (Obermaier, 2024), he had no such priority for the Gaza War.

Similarly, during her first visit to Israel after the Hamas attack, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock encapsulated *Staatsraison* by declaring, "In these days we are all Israelis," again highlighting the perception of Israel's security as an integral part of German foreign policy (Ruck, 2024). Additionally, during a UN Security Council meeting in October

2023, Baerbock stated that, as the foreign minister of the country responsible for the worst crime in history, Germans were uneasy that the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors were being held as hostages by terrorists (Bir, 2023).

The German public, however, was not so enthusiastic about Germany's political elite using the *Staatsraison* argument to justify their pro-Israeli policies. An October 2023 study (Ruck, 2024), for example, revealed that 52 percent of the younger generation in Germany wanted their government to acknowledge the Palestinian people's suffering during the Gaza War. Moreover, civil society organizations in Germany, including the Jewish ones, issued open letters to the government criticizing the police's suppression of all pro-Palestinian protests (Ruck, 2024). Indeed, by imposing heavy restrictions on pro-Palestinian demonstrations, the German state showed that it was incapable of differentiating between legitimate protests against war crimes and the threats posed by anti-Semitism for Jewish people in Germany (Schneider & Grimm, 2024; Obermaier, 2024).<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting its pro-Israeli policies, the German government abstained from two UN resolutions on the war: The one on 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2023, which called for an urgent, continuous humanitarian cease-fire leading to a termination of hostilities; and the one on 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2023, which demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages and the guarantee of humanitarian access to Gaza (Varma & Huggard, 2023). Germany's abstention was motivated by several main factors: the lack of explicit mention of Hamas terrorism; insufficient clarity concerning the demand for the release of all hostages; and a failure to affirm Israel's right to self-defense (euractiv, 2023). Nevertheless, Israel was annoyed that Germany did not meet its expectations of voting against the resolution of October 2023. Israel's ambassador to Germany, Ron Prosor, described Germany's abstention as unacceptable and morally wrong for Israel. He noted that Germany's *staatsraison* meant unwavering support for Israel, particularly during difficult times. As Benner (2023) argues, Germany adopted a rational policy in line with its national interests in abstaining. In November 2023, Germany, together with the other 26 members of the EU reached a consensus on a proposal for humanitarian corridors and pauses. However, the German government still objected to the proposed cease-fire, claiming that it would equate Israel with Hamas (Barigazzi & Moens, 2023).

The German government has maintained its support for Israel by supplying submarines, warships, vehicles, aircraft engines, and torpedoes. Despite the dramatically rising Palestinian death toll, Germany has supported Israel

unconditionally, politically and materially. Indeed, Germany's defense export authorizations to Israel have increased nearly tenfold since 2022 (Obermaier, 2024) while Germany, along with Italy, the UK and USA, has been one of the Israeli Defense Forces' main military equipment suppliers. Despite these weapons being used to kill tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza and devastate its cities, Germany has disregarded the appeals of prominent humanitarian officials and specialists calling for an end to arms sales (Tekin & Taştan, 2024). Germany's transfer of weapons to Israel has prompted many human rights organizations to sever their ties with German entities, thereby damaging Germany's previously positive image in the Arab world, which had been established through its soft power-oriented foreign policy (Schneider & Grimm, 2024).

Germany's strategy of overlooking Israel's violations of human rights and international law has placed the Federal Republic in a precarious situation. Nicaragua, for example, applied to the International Court of Justice to accuse Germany of complicity in genocide in Gaza, although this case was dismissed. Despite these accusations, German officials have persisted in employing *Staatsraison* in their firm support for Israel. For example, in a speech to the Bundestag in October 2024 justifying Israel's attacks on Palestinians, Foreign Minister Baerbock stated that Israel had the right to self-defense and even argued that civilian settlements could lose their protected status because Hamas terrorists were using them as shields. This statement, which came after the deaths of approximately 42,000 Palestinians in one year of non-stop attacks on Gaza by Israeli forces, was widely criticized, both domestically and internationally. For example, the UN Special Rapporteur on Palestine, Francesca Albanese, denounced Baerbock's speech and warned of the legal repercussions of supporting a state that commits international crimes (Ruck, 2024). In fact, these developments showed the German government that *Staatsraison* had its limitations and complications. In particular, the approach subjects the country to accusations of impartiality, undermining democratic values and human rights, and accusations of cooperation in the genocide occurring in Gaza (Ruck, 2024).

As Thorsten Benner notes, Germany's *Staatsraison* stance means that German support for Israel is strong—but not unconditional; it has limits. While honoring its moral obligation to Israel, Germany directs its foreign policy according to its own national interests rather than Israel's. As outlined earlier, Germany abstained in the October 2023 UN resolution rather than voting against the cease-fire. That is, Germany sought to

balance its interests by not alienating Jordan, the resolution's sponsor. Germany also maintained strong relations with Global South countries while defending Israel. Aligning with the EU, Germany has continued supporting a two-state solution in the region. Throughout the war, Germany has sent humanitarian support to Gaza, having also been one of the Palestinian territories' major financial supporters for 40 years (Benner, 2023). Following a brief break after UNRWA was accused of links with Hamas, Germany resumed funding in April 2024 to become the largest donor (unwatch.org, 2014). Germany's active role as a faithful ally does not mean that German foreign policy is completely shaped within this framework. While maintaining and improving this relationship, Germany also seeks to realize its interests on a rational basis within the international system.

## Conclusion

This foreign policy case study of Germany's relationship with Israel demonstrates that Holsti's national role conception theory remains a useful tool for analyzing foreign policies almost fifty years after its introduction. Holsti contends that a state's foreign policy is influenced by its national role conception, which embodies the state's suitable orientations towards the external environment. Since its establishment following World War II, Germany has maintained a particular role conception that has guided its foreign policy. As frequently repeated during the Merkel administration, Germany has aimed at promoting global peace through a united Europe. This objective has also required Germany's commitment to safeguarding Israel's security as part of Germany's reason of state (*Staatsraison*) (Aruch, 2013, p. 49). Having a special relationship with Israel has been one of the main components of the post-war German national role conception. Holsti claims that role conceptions encompass the policy-makers' personal interpretation of actions appropriate for their state. Since the early 1950s, Germany's political elites from various ideological strands have maintained an enduring consensus over this role conception.

In fact, Germany's special relationship with Israel can also be analyzed through Holsti's role performance, which posits that actions and commitments to other states are influenced by social, cultural, and historical values. Consequently, this special relationship with Israel is connected to Germany's moral and historical responsibility for the Holocaust, alongside German national political and economic interests. Moreover, Holsti's role prescription that includes norms societies attach to particular positions can clearly be observed in Germany's relation with Israel. It is still critical to recognize the fact that this particular

relationship still constitutes one of the main pillars of German foreign policy.

Nevertheless, Germany's support for Israel has not been unconditional or unlimited. In particular, having Europeanized its foreign policy as a significant EU member during decades of interaction with other European states and institutions, Germany has supported the EU's official two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine problem. The historical evolution of Germany's special relationship with Israel shows that it has deepened and strengthened this relationship over decades, presently manifesting as an integral aspect of *Staatsraison*.

The recent Gaza War has dramatically tested this relationship, both normatively and politically. Israel's far-right Netanyahu government would like Germany's support to be unconditional despite Israel's internationally criticized war crimes against Palestinians in Gaza. Conversely, Germany has risked damaging its international image and regional interests due to its ongoing support for Israel, including militarily. As part of its national role conception, Germany's support for Israel has left it in a precarious situation due to Israel's excessive use of force against Palestinians, which has arguably escalated to the level of genocide. Consequently, Germany has faced widespread criticisms of moral and strategic blindness. Faced with the international community's pressure, Germany has occasionally emphasized the need to comply with international law, yet remained largely indifferent to such criticisms.

A symbolically important recent example of Germany's continued support is that Friedrich Merz, leader of the Christian Democratic Union, and new Chancellor after winning the February 2025 elections, immediately invited Netanyahu to visit Germany (Abu Shamala, 2025). This reflects Germany's persistent strong support for Israel although Netanyahu currently faces an international arrest warrant.

Germany's special relationship with Israel undoubtedly also has implications for the EU's position in the Middle East Peace Process. The historical development of European foreign policy regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, which is the core of the wider regional conflict, shows that Germany has remained a reliable partner of Israel in the EU. While the EU officially supports a two-state solution to the conflict, the latest Gaza War has again revealed deep disagreements among European countries. More specifically, while Germany, Austria, Czechia, and Hungary are pro-Israel, another group, including Spain, Ireland, and Belgium, has advocated for a more balanced position that stresses respect for international law and human rights.

The recent Gaza War has escalated tensions in the Middle East to dramatic levels. A number of global developments are also feeding the uncertainty in the region. While the Atlantic bloc's instability is forcing the EU to turn inward due to its security concerns, US support for Netanyahu has strengthened Israel's aggressive approach to its region. Indeed, the US president Donald Trump has openly expressed plans to expel Gaza's population and restructure Gaza as a vacation and entertainment destination (France 24, 2025). It is also uncertain how effectively Arab states will be able to respond to these plans. In the new conjuncture due to these radical changes, Germany can be expected to further strengthen its special relationship with Israel while continuing to advocate a two-state solution. It will not be long, however, before it becomes evident whether a two-state solution remains viable.

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, we use the name “Germany” to refer, as relevant, to the Federal Republic of Germany or West Germany during the Cold War and also for the reunified Germany after 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Germany claimed to be the sole representative of the entire German nation and strategically refrained from establishing official diplomatic relations with Israel, fearing official recognition of East Germany by Arab states and economic sanctions.

<sup>3</sup> These payments are still being made. In 2022, Germany transferred 82 billion euros to Israel (see Federal Foreign Office, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Middle East Peace Process, see William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967*, California, University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> The German government also deported Arab folk heroes, such as British Palestinian doctor Ghassan Abu-Sittah while, in December 2023, the Heinrich Böll Foundation stopped co-sponsoring the Hannah Arendt Prize for Masha Green after the political thinker drew a parallel between the current struggles of besieged Gazans and those of ghettoized Jews in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe.

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