

Executive Summary:

RESONANCES.

GERMAN-ISRAELI CULTURAL RELATIONS

Taking stock – Analysing trends –
Making recommendations

An in-depth study by Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik

This study is dedicated to all those bridge builders who have tirelessly worked and continue to work for prospering German-Israeli relations – despite all resistances. They have created a space of resonances.

The Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik (Institute for new social sculptures) is made up of Jewish directors, writers, producers and other artists, critical of antisemitism. Since the Institute's foundation in 2015 it develops artistic projects from Jewish points of view that address Jewish life and heritage, as well as memorial culture and antisemitism. Some of these projects are articulated as outreach and community building processes. Another focus of the Institut's work is consultancy and training for institutions in the arts and culture, independent arts organisations, as well as freelance curators or artists, on everything to do with the history and the presence of antisemitism. The Institute also conducts studies, engages in advocacy, and offers cultural policy advice and recommendations. Since 2020, it has coordinated a growing network of Jewish, Israeli, and other artists critical of antisemitism.

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By Gila Baumöhl and Hannah Dannel



INTRODUCTION

»IN THESE TIMES« – ON CRUMBLING BRIDGES

Stella Leder

In early 2024 I received a phone call which highlighted the results of developments that have been taking place in the cultural sector for several years. A renowned Israeli artist contacted us at *Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik*; she had applied for an executive position at a German arts institution but, despite her proven qualifications, had not even been invited to an interview. A member of the selection committee revealed the unofficial reason to her: »in these times« it was not opportune to appoint an Israeli artist to such a leading position. We hear these three words and similar stories again and again from our network of Jewish and Israeli artists. In Germany, direct calls for a boycott of Israeli artists usually do not resonate, especially when compared to other countries. And yet, in various places people avoid collaborating with Israeli artists to avoid getting caught in a shitstorm themselves. The artist mentioned here actually decided against protesting her exclusion from the application process to avoid further marginalizing herself. That is also part of the dynamic of silent boycott.

The heated and confrontational debates about antisemitism, boycotts, and Israel have led to pain and uncertainty. Generally speaking, a strong dichotomy seems to have established itself pitting the cultural sector, on the one hand, against people critical of antisemitism and friends of Israel, on the other. Since its foundation in 2015, *Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik* has established itself as an interdisciplinary platform for the arts, artistic-historical research, dialogue formats, and cultural consultancy at the interface with all initiatives pushing back against antisemitism — and so, as a mediator in the vehement debates of recent years. From our day-to-day work, we know that beyond these public debates there are numerous artistic and cultural institutions as well as individual artists who address antisemitism critically, seek to engage constructively with antisemitism-related conflicts, and collaborate with Israeli artists.

Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik has been coordinating a nationwide network of Israeli, Jewish, and artists critical of antisemitism since 2020. This was also prompted by the debate surrounding boycotts, which intensified following the German Bundestag's non-binding BDS resolution in 2019. In 2023, after October 7, it became clear to us that we had

to expand our collaborations with Israeli artists and cultural institutions. For regardless of whether cultural players in Germany choose not to collaborate with Israeli artists and institutions out of political conviction, or whether pause their collaboration due to uncertainty, both ultimately lead to less exchange and thus less support for Israeli artists. At a time when support is needed more than ever.

This survey of German-Israeli cultural relations was also created against this backdrop. I am grateful to the two authors, Hannah Dannel and Gila Baumöhl, for having written this report for *Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik*: Without their political and cultural expertise on both countries, their specialist knowledge of the respective political, cultural, and civil society structures, as well as their ability to work in an interdisciplinary manner and convey diverse perspectives, this study would not exist.

Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik publishes this survey on the basis of several considerations that should be briefly mentioned. The Gaza War and the reactions to it are detrimental to Israeli artists. However, their work and perspectives are of great importance for a nuanced view of Israel here and also for Israel's democratic culture. In Israel, much less financial resources are available for culture and cultural exchange. At the same time, fewer Israeli artists are invited to other countries; new uncertainties in dealing with the political situation are mingling with old reservations. In addition, the security situation is significantly limiting cultural exchange with Israel. I therefore see the survey as an indirect support of Israeli society. On the one hand. And on the other hand, it is about Germany's society. It is important for Jewish communities that Israelis continue to live and work here happily and comfortably — but not only for them. I assume that the exchange with Israeli cultural institutions and artists will lead to important and innovative impulses and that the artistic scenes in Germany will benefit from this — and with them, ultimately, democratic society in Germany as a whole. And, more generally, a decline in forms of cooperation between democratic countries is something we simply cannot afford in view of the complex global challenges we face. These challenges include dealing with terrorism and hybrid warfare, that is

beyond question – and the (critical) examination of this topic through the arts is indispensable. At the same time, German-Israeli cultural exchange will, hopefully, not only be limited to political issues.

This study is an outline of existing and functioning cultural relations between Germany and Israel. A survey of Jewish and Israeli artists in Germany was not part of this inventory; their perspectives are therefore not taken into account, as they are largely absent from the institutional contexts surveyed. Based on the German Federal Foreign Office's expanded definition of culture, various areas of cultural exchange were examined: platforms for encounters, youth and education, academic exchange, civil-society dialogue, and the arts. The lack of exchange in the arts is chilling. The findings in this area lead to the fear that cooperation and artistic exchange could stop. And yet, the authors also reported from their many conversations that interviewees were inspired by the interview; perhaps in some cases the discussions alone will lead to renewed cooperation in the arts. In any case, there is an urgent need for cultural policy incentives to promote exchange. In the other areas examined, German-Israeli exchange is in a much better state. It is more than vibrant in science and technology, supported both by the commitment of individuals and by various structures and funding streams. For example, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF, now BMFT) last year provided 36 million euros of funding for German-Israeli bilateral cooperation – to name just one example. In contrast to the arts, in other areas there are structures that continuously promote exchange. For young people, students, young professionals and executives/leaders, for example, there are the *German-Israeli Future Forum Foundation* and *ConAct – Coordination Center for German-Israeli Youth Exchange*. Comparable structures and funding are currently lacking for cultural exchange in the arts. Perhaps the interdisciplinary perspective of this study can provide stimuli for the arts in this regard. We hope that both institutions and politicians will find suggestions and ways to implement them.

In the fall and winter of 2023, *Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik* received submissions from our network of Israeli, Jewish, and artists critical of antisemitism: social media posts from various German cultural institutions were forwarded to us, expressing themselves in ways that could be interpreted as acts of solidarity with Hamas. Since so many institutions remained silent after October 7, these statements weighed particularly heavily. The Israeli artists will not forget these moments.

On the other hand, after October 7, there were not only demands for boycotts, actual disruptive actions, and verbal and physical violence – but also genuine horror in cultural institutions and among artists about the horrific massacre and the ensuing massive rise of antisemitism in Germany. And everywhere, we noticed multiple uncertainties: how were cultural institutions to deal with calls for boycotts, what position should they take, and how could they find out who might be potential partners for cooperation. We are convinced that this represents an opportunity. *Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik* advocates for the establishment of support-structures which institutions can turn to with their questions – we are certain many institutions will accept them as that: support. The precondition is that taking up such offers must happen on a voluntary basis. What we believe is needed, and urgently, is this: reinforce positive tendencies, create role models, and offer support to those who want to establish relationships.

While the study's findings for the individual areas examined vary greatly, there is a common thread that runs through all of them: The interviewees spoke about the generational shift in German-Israeli relations – and the fact that for younger people Israel's importance is no longer self-explanatory. If this development coincides with an international boycott and the uncertainties outlined above, it could lead to even less exchange and cooperation in the future. Counteracting this and preventing a »resonance disaster«¹ is the aim of this publication.

*Stella Leder is managing director
of the Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik.*

¹ The metaphor of 'resonance disasters' referred to here is explained on the back page.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the year of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel, this survey by the independent arts organisation *Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik* aims to take the pulse of German-Israeli cultural relations: how vital, sustainable, and mutually resonant they are – and how they can be strengthened. After the rupture in civilisation that was the Shoah, at first, it was unthinkable that Israel and Germany would establish official relations. Many people, especially in Israel, balked at the idea of being connected to Germany in any way. Thanks to committed individuals on both sides, cautious relations were established between the young Jewish state and the Federal Republic of Germany. Over time, not least civil society organizations pushed for the establishment of official relations. Amid protests in both countries, diplomatic relations were established in 1965.

Looking at German-Israeli relations today, there is a noticeable number of connections and cooperative arrangements. They are outlined in this survey which operates with an expanded definition of culture taken from the German Federal Foreign Office's policy framework of Cultural Relations and Education Policy (AKBP): platforms for encounters, exchange of young people, academic exchange, civil society dialogue, and cultural exchange in the arts. Research combined with qualitative interviews provided insights into the development and current status of German-Israeli cultural relations, as well as the associated challenges, opportunities, and future prospects. The analysis concludes with key observations and recommendations.

In 2004, the public *Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations* (ifa) published the study »Continuity and Change. German-Israeli Cultural Relations – Inventory and Recommendations.«² It aimed to depict the programs and actors of German-Israeli cultural relations, although it focused on the dissemination of German culture in Israel. The current study is in some ways modelled on the previous one. Some 20 years later, the present study takes stock again of German-Israeli cultural relations, and it starts from the assumption that the network of relations between Germany and Israel is valuable to both sides and holds great potential

for the future. The authors hope that this publication contributes to German-Israeli cultural relations and that it will stimulate a debate about their future development.

This survey focuses on German-Israeli joint projects, funding structures, and institutions, as well as the representation of Israeli culture in Germany. The study period covers the years 2014 to mid-2025. A relatively long period was chosen to allow for an analysis of trends, especially since many formats had to pause as of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and following the Hamas massacre on 7th October 2023. The dynamic conflict situation in the Middle East at the time the inventory was written presented the authors with challenges: both the activities in German-Israeli exchange and the availability of data and interviewees were constantly changing. The research was conducted from January to May 2025, and the text was completed in June 2025. Later developments were not considered or, if they occurred during the writing phase, could only be considered sporadically.

1. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study, three key recommendations can be identified that are intended to stimulate further discussion as they may provide impetus for future action.

GREATER RESONANCE: PROMOTING ENCOUNTERS AND COOPERATION BETWEEN GERMANS AND ISRAELIS

In all areas examined, it is clear that personal encounters between Germans and Israelis are of key importance for maintaining and strengthening German-Israeli (cultural) relations. Personal exchange contributes to a better understanding of each other: Not only does it enable a deeper understanding of the history, culture, religion, and society of the other country; it also lays the foundation for personal contacts and – potentially long-term – friendships and structural cooperation.

² Hannah Schubert (today: Dannel): *Kontinuität und Umbruch. Die deutsch-israelischen Kulturbeziehungen – Bestandsaufnahme und Empfehlungen* (ifa//dokumente/3/2004). Published by Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa). Stuttgart: 2004. Online: www.ifa.de/publikationen/ergebnisse/kontinuitaet-und-umbruch (last downloaded on 2nd June 2025).

The encounters strengthen intercultural competence, historical understanding, the ability to reflect, and democratic awareness – especially when they take place in Israel. Such encounters and collaborations primarily take place in areas where structures for German-Israeli exchange exist; otherwise, the exchange depends on the personal interest and commitment of individuals.

German-Israeli connections offer significant added value – both in terms of content and personal engagement. They open up spaces for a lively, reciprocal exchange, allowing both sides to engage with each other, learn from each other, and develop new perspectives together. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen German-Israeli exchange, attract new target groups, and explore relevant future topics. Where appropriate structures are lacking, they should be created.

UPDATE: DEVELOPING THE NARRATIVE OF GERMAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS

The Shoah has long been *the* cornerstone of German-Israeli relations. However, with the increasing distance from the times of World War II, the passing away of the remaining witnesses, and a wider generational change, the Shoah no longer functions as a connecting link between the younger generations of both countries. As a result, many of the bridges built by the pioneers of German-Israeli relations no longer fulfill their function: What use are the most architecturally beautiful bridges if the rivers flow differently?³ Therefore, it is important to look to the future – and to bring young Germans and Israelis together around common issues of the future. There are plenty of global challenges that affect both countries. Through exchange, common answers may be found.

The current narrative of German-Israeli relations must find a sequel; the chapters written so far seemingly no longer win over current and future generations to engage in building a shared future. In this, the Shoah will always remain a key element of German-Israeli relations. Not only is engaging with history and its contemporary significance fundamental to understanding and shaping any relationships between Germans and Israelis. It is also essential to understand the lessons of the Shoah when looking at the future – especially in light of some developments in the societies of both countries threatening democracy, and the massive increase in antisemitic incidents worldwide.

PERSPECTIVES: LEVERAGING THE 65TH ANNIVERSARY OF GERMAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS

In the past, the anniversaries of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel served as an opportunity to honour this special partnership. In the current 60th anniversary year, only a limited number of activities have taken place to highlight this special recurrence. The upcoming 65th anniversary should be taken as an opportunity to build on what has been achieved, to compensate for the setbacks in some areas, and to further develop structural cooperation between the two countries. The period up to the 65th anniversary in 2030 should be used to deepen the German-Israeli partnership, initiate new collaborations, expand joint activities, and jointly implement innovative ideas. Workshops with key stakeholders on both sides could provide a platform for developing joint projects. These projects could be supported through appropriate funding. The projects could then be presented to the public in the anniversary year – along with other celebratory activities.

2. OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS FROM THE DIFFERENT AREAS STUDIED

The key observations and findings of this study are presented below for each area: platforms for encounters, exchange of young people, academic exchange, civil-society dialogue, and cultural exchange in the arts, with a separate chapter dedicated to each of them.

PLATFORMS FOR ENCOUNTERS

The consequences of generational change have become apparent when reviewing the various platforms for German-Israeli encounters in both countries. The first generations that drove the rapprochement between Germans and Israelis are largely no longer with us. Furthermore, some very active actors have retired due to age, while there is a lack of successors. Carrying German-Israeli relations into the future requires people who are enthusiastic about them and want to shape them. This requires ways and means to provide long-term, moral and

3 This question arose in the conversation with Tamara Or, Director of the *Stiftung Deutsch-Israelisches Zukunftsforum* (Foundation German-Israeli Future Forum).

financial support for the commitment of volunteers and full-time actors. In recognition of their historic achievements, it is important to academically record, process, and render (digitally) accessible the cultural heritage of German-speaking Jews in Israel; the same applies to the cultural heritage of Israel's founding generation in Germany.

It is also desirable to deepen and expand the twin-city partnerships between German and Israeli cities and districts. According to the research carried out for this study, eleven German-Israeli partnerships were established in the past ten years bringing the total number of German-Israeli twin-city partnerships to 105. This is not a huge number considering the 3,200 cities and municipalities that make up the German Association of Cities – especially since the number of twin-city partnerships also includes district partnerships. Between Germany and Poland alone, there are over 500 municipal partnerships, and with France there are almost 2,400.

EXCHANGE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Since the first youth encounters between Germans and Israelis, a lively exchange has developed. Youth exchanges prepared and supported with a sound educational foundation promote intercultural competence, historical understanding, and democratic awareness; they strengthen empathy and tolerance of ambiguity. Experiences gained during youth exchanges help young people navigate complex social debates with greater confidence. These are important findings from the research and discussions conducted in preparation for this study. German-Israeli youth exchange thus promotes the development of responsible and informed citizens whilst strengthening relations between the two countries.

Youth and school exchanges should therefore be further strengthened. A central instrument will be the planned German-Israeli Youth Office (*Deutsch-Israelisches Jugendwerk*); the politically agreed plan should be implemented quickly as soon as the German and Israeli sides have resolved some remaining questions. In addition, it is important to ensure greater visibility of existing programs and a targeted approach to specific groups – including through young ambassadors. Both contribute to attracting young people from different backgrounds including from immigrant communities of Germany and Israel to the exchange. More active German-Israeli school partnerships in all German federal states could also strengthen this exchange.

To ensure a nuanced approach to Israel's history, the Middle East conflict, and antisemitism in schools, teacher training and appropriate teaching materials are needed; textbooks and curricula must be further developed accordingly. An hitherto nearly untapped potential lies in outreach and community arts projects. They offer unique, associative approaches to socially and historically relevant topics. They should be promoted in German-Israeli relations, taking into account established standards such as the so-called *Beutelsbach* Consensus for political education.

ACADEMIC EXCHANGE

In academia, there are numerous German-Israeli collaborations and exchange programs – between universities, research institutions, and academic organizations – as well as corresponding funding bodies. A close network of connections has developed over the years. This network can be further expanded and strengthened in some areas, and there is a need to attract young academics to German-Israeli cooperation.

Another important finding from the research is that universities should impart more knowledge about Israeli culture, art, history, politics, and society. Understanding and embedding Israel studies as a theme cutting across traditional academic fields of study – for example, artistic disciplines, the humanities and social sciences – could have a positive long-term impact on traditional cultural exchange. Specialized research and teaching on Israel is needed, which could and should be facilitated by establishing chairs and fully fledged departments or study programs for Israel Studies at state universities.

The actors in German-Israeli academic relations face the challenge of maintaining exchange and cooperation even in times of crisis – for example, after October 7, or in light of the Israel-Iran war in June 2025. Furthermore, the question arises as to how the strength of academic relations can be secured in the future, given the increasing hostility towards Israel, growing antisemitism, as well as international boycott campaigns – all of which taking hold in Germany, too.

CIVIL-SOCIETY DIALOGUE

The dialogue between German and Israeli society is shaped, implemented, and promoted by a variety of actors. These include private, public or party-affiliated foundations, political education institutions, trade unions, memorial

sites, and non-governmental organizations. Personal encounters between Germans and Israelis – ideally in Israel – are of inestimable value to German-Israeli relations. A key recommendation of this review is to increase opportunities in this field through, for example, educational and study trips. These should also be aimed at bringing new participant groups into such dialogue formats.

It is desirable to strengthen political education not only to impart knowledge about the country and its people – but also because domestic political developments in both countries are so challenging: authoritarian-populist forces and the ensuing political polarization are endangering democracy in both countries. On top of that, through wars and conflicts, the security situation is an issue for both societies. A nuanced and multi-layered remembrance work based on appropriate historiographical and pedagogical standards can contribute to political education, thus strengthening democratic awareness. To this end, the work of memorial sites and other places of remembrance should be strengthened. An exchange between German and Israeli experts operating in these fields should be promoted in order to initiate cooperation, to prevent the instrumentalization of history for political purposes, and to open up further perspectives on the culture of remembrance.

But is important to promote contacts between civil society organizations from both countries also in a broader sense. Partnerships and joint projects can be initiated in a great number of thematic fields as Germany and Israel face similar and common global challenges. These include the growing authoritarian threat to democracies, climate change and environmental destruction, wars and conflicts, global inequality, digitalization and the use of AI.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN THE ARTS

German-Israeli cultural exchange in the arts appears to be declining across all art forms. This trend was already indicated in the previous study from 2004 and has now become more established. Reasons include a deteriorating image of Israel in Germany and the impact of international calls for boycotts. Especially in contemporary art, Israeli artists and institutions are increasingly viewed with reservations, and in some contexts, collaboration is considered undesirable. Practical restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict situation in the Middle East have also made, or continue to make cooperation very difficult.

It is also striking that there are very different understandings of German-Israeli cultural exchange: visions of what constitutes Israeli culture or Israeli cultural creators vary widely. On top of that the German side sometimes mixes and interchanges Jewish with Israeli, labeling projects on Jewish themes as »Israeli culture« – and vice versa. The discussions also revealed an imbalance in German-Israeli cultural exchange, rooted in the different size and populations, the unequal financial resources, and the history of the two countries. This imbalance complicates bilateralism, i.e., the reciprocal nature of the exchange.

After October 7, cultural life in Israel initially came to a complete standstill. It gradually resumed at the beginning of 2024, as did cultural exchange.⁴ However, there is a noticeable sense of resignation in the Israeli cultural scene: international collaborations collapsed, agreed loans between museums were not implemented, festivals were canceled, and even long-standing contacts stopped responding. Compared to the situation with other countries, German partners remained comparatively reliable: they showed understanding for the difficult situation and often maintained cultural exchange and dialogue despite security concerns, massively increased costs, and international calls for boycotts. Events and encounters in Israel, as well as bilateral exchange formats, are difficult to plan for at least the second half of 2025 because they are likely to be canceled due to the security situation. And the international situation also plays out in Germany as a number of cultural institutions in Germany feel under pressure: calls for boycotts, security concerns, and uncertainty are leading to fewer Israeli artists being invited and hardly any new relationships being established.

Three key recommendations can be formulated to strengthen relations in the arts; with each of them to be implemented in a number of concrete measures: Firstly, uncertainties among stakeholders should be addressed and spaces for dialogue should be kept open. Secondly, interest in Israel's cultural landscape should be increased. Thirdly, German-Israeli cultural exchange should be specifically promoted with cultural policy incentives and the development of appropriate organisational and funding structures.

The current situation is characterized by uncertainty and complicates the planning and implementation of joint projects. Now, more than ever, it is important to maintain ties in German-Israeli cultural exchange by continuing programs and finding creative solutions where necessary.

⁴ The effects of the war between Israel and Iran (13th to 24th June 2025) could no longer be included for analysis in this survey.

To address the uncertainty of stakeholders, cultural institutions need the support of specialised advice points to address and to deal with boycotts and antisemitism. Furthermore, there is a very concrete task for cultural administrations on the federal, state and municipal levels that have implemented 'arms-length' decision making processes by juries tasked with selecting funding proposals and candidates for leading positions in the arts. It should be ensured that Jewish, Israeli and such perspectives that are critical of antisemitism are included when appointing jury members. German-Israeli cultural exchange can be deepened in the long term by improving and further developing communication between stakeholders from both countries and, especially, by regaining a better quality of discourse on Israel. This requires spaces where open and nuanced discussion is possible—even on difficult topics, without hasty or populist attributions, and with a diverse range of perspectives.

In traditional cultural exchange in the arts, too, it is important to win over younger generations to German-Israeli relations and to inspire them for Israel's cultural landscape. Cultural exchange is in the interest of both parties. Artists in Germany can benefit from and learn from the resilience, innovative drive, and tolerance of ambiguity of Israeli society. Conversely, exchange with Germany supports the Israeli cultural scene and increases its international visibility—which, not least, strengthens democratic Israel.

It is recommended to create a suitable structure to encourage and promote German-Israeli cultural cooperation. How this can be structured institutionally, programmatically, and financially should be discussed on the basis of this review. German-Israeli cultural exchange could also be supported through additional residencies, short-term scholarships, reciprocal delegation visits, networking processes, and specific funding programs for cooperation projects. The humanities and cultural studies departments at universities, as well as arts academies, should play a role in this regard by conveying more knowledge about Israeli art and culture, thus stimulating curiosity about it. The 65th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel in 2030 should be used as an opportunity to intensify and further develop artistic exchange – together with key players from the culture and cultural policy sectors of both countries, through joint projects and targeted funding incentives.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The attributions to German-Israeli relations are manifold: There is much talk of special relations, of Germany's special responsibility for Israel, of a normalization of relations, of relations as a gift. All these terms demonstrate that the ties are anything but normal – 80 years after the Holocaust and 60 years after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel. For a long time, the leitmotif was Germany's special responsibility for Israel in light of the Nazi crimes. In her 2008 speech to the Israeli parliament, then-Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke of Germany's »historical responsibility« as »part of *raison d'état*« and called Israel's security »never negotiable«.⁵ The implications of the concept of *raison d'état* for German policy are unclear and part of a debate that – depending on the current situation and the conflict in the Middle East – is sometimes more, sometimes less heated.

Appreciation of Israel and German-Israeli relations varies greatly within German society. Numerous projects, events, collaborations, exchanges, and platforms for encounters do exist, as this review demonstrates. However, these connections are not deeply rooted in society, nor do they reach the broader public. Knowledge about Israel is limited, and its image is often superficial and shaped by stereotypes. Several interviewees described the commitment to German-Israeli relations and the culture of remembrance as an »elite project«. At the same time, there's the concrete threat that a negative image of Israel fully spreads into all fields of traditional cultural exchange, dance, theater, literature, film, and the visual arts. And this at a time when there is still a lack of structures to connect the art scenes of both countries.

The image of Israel is deteriorating in German society; at the same time, exchange and thus also opportunities for encounters were severely restricted in the period following 7th of October 2023. Jews in Israel never want to see themselves as victims again after the Holocaust, and this is the foundation of Israeli policy. What prevails in Germany is »never again perpetrators« which is accompanied by skepticism toward military violence among large segments of the population – and it contributes greatly to a critical attitude towards Israel. In recent years there seems to be a gradual shift in the aforementioned skepticism – in the face of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. New debates, such as those about the relationship between colonialism and the Holocaust, are also influencing and complicating

⁵ *Speech of the Federal Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel at the Knesset on 18th March 2008 in Jerusalem.* In: Bulletin der Bundesregierung Nr. 26-1, 18.03.2008, www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-dr-angela-merkel-796170 (Online, last downloaded on 2nd June 2025).

German-Israeli relations. In any case, Germany needs a greater appreciation of Israel's need for security in light of its geopolitical situation and its resulting security policy.

Conversely, Germany has gained respect in Israel in recent years. Germany is perceived in Israel as a reliable partner that stands firmly by Israel's side – especially in the context of international relations. Israel-related antisemitism and attacks against Israelis are increasing worldwide, and Israel is increasingly being excluded, demonized, and even delegitimized internationally. Interlocutors point to a shift in discourse: While the discussion previously revolved around the 1967 borders, now 1948 has become the pivotal point of debate, the year when Israel was founded: Israel's very existence is increasingly being questioned.

The inventory further shows that both societies can benefit from each other. Over many years, German-Israeli relations have grown and spawned numerous collaborations, networks, projects, and much more. Existing activities should be continued and expanded, new ideas developed, and projects initiated – and policymakers should create the framework for this. Together, Germany and Israel can develop innovative approaches to the global challenges of our time. This would be a win-win situation for both sides. And in turn, such increased cooperation would strengthen the common ties between Israel and Germany in general. What the German-Israeli partnership also needs is an open, approachable, and at the same time critical dialogue on equal terms. This requires more courage and less conformism, less black-and-white thinking and more shades of gray. Especially in light of the developments in Israel that are challenging democracy, Germany should continue to support Israeli civil society and maintain dialogue with the Israeli government.

4. OUTLOOK

In their project, the authors faced the challenge of analyzing German-Israeli cultural relations in times of war, uncertainty, and constant upheaval. The war between Israel and Iran in June 2025, in particular, presented the authors with complex tasks: How can recommendations for German-Israeli cultural relations be developed and presented when it is completely uncertain how cultural exchange will continue in the coming days, weeks, and months? How long will the war last and cultural exchange

be put on hold? What consequences will the war have for German and Israeli society? Even during the war, the authors observed that trends continued to intensify: Critical voices toward Israel became even more critical, while voices idealizing Israel became even more effusive. So, what does the war, and the humanitarian situation in Gaza, do to the image of Israel in German society—and conversely, what does the German reaction do to the perception of Germany in Israel? What impact will the situation have on exchanges, which came to a halt again in June 2025? Will Germans working in Israel, who have repeatedly left the country for security reasons, return to Israel? What are the consequences for youth and school exchanges, for partnerships between German and Israeli organizations, and for the work of civil society? How will the situation affect cooperation in science and research when Israeli researchers are serving as reservists and Israeli institutions – such as the *Weizmann Institute of Science* in Rehovot – are massively damaged by Iranian missiles? And what effect will the situation have on artists and cultural institutions when events are canceled, funding is subsequently withdrawn, and it is unclear when and under what conditions cooperation can be resumed?

The current crisis makes it clear that especially now, there is a great need for support and advice in German-Israeli relations. With this review, which explores and analyses the field of German-Israeli cultural relations, and expands it with future perspectives, the authors hope to provide impetus for these relations and contribute to their strengthening. German-Israeli cultural relations have already survived several crises – such as wars and terrorist attacks. Knowing that the current crisis in the Middle East can also be overcome, gives rise to confidence that German-Israeli cultural relations can be led into the future with renewed strength.

The ties between Germany and Israel did not emerge out of nowhere. They were created by people. They must continue to be shaped by people. This requires role models and cultural policy incentives. The future of German-Israeli cultural relations requires a shared vision that will be further developed over time. The existing German-Israeli resonance space still holds great potential from which both sides can benefit. To utilize this potential, a political framework is needed that enables the further development of cultural relations and sustainably supports German-Israeli cultural exchange.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gila Baumöhl was born in Jerusalem and grew up in Munich. She studied Peace and Conflict Studies (M.A.), Political Science, and Sociology (B.A.) in Munich, Frankfurt am Main, Darmstadt, and Nicosia. From 2015 to 2022, she headed the Office of the President of the *Central Council of Jews in Germany*. From 2023 to 2024, she was in charge of the office of the Minister of Higher Education and Arts of the State of Hesse. In December 2024, she joined *Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik* to research and compile this review of German-Israeli cultural relations. Gila Baumöhl's volunteer activities include serving as a delegate of the *International Council of Jewish Women* at the Council of Europe Conference of International Non-Governmental Organizations and in the *World Jewish Congress Jewish Diplomatic Corps*, an international network of young Jewish leaders. There, she leads the Western Europe regional group and the Holocaust Remembrance Interest Group, campaigns against antisemitism and for the State of Israel. She is also active as a speaker, moderator, and author.

Hannah Dannel (née Schubert) was born in West-Berlin and graduated from high school in Bonn. She studied Jewish history and literature, as well as educational science, in Heidelberg and Jerusalem. Her master's thesis examined competing narratives in Israeli historiography of the War of Independence. After graduating, she worked at the Israeli Embassy in Berlin from 1999 to 2002. While working, she completed a part-time training course as a public relations consultant (DAPR) and subsequently worked for various organizations and start-ups in Berlin. In 2004, she published the precursor study on German-Israeli cultural relations on behalf of the *Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations* (ifa). From 2005 to June 2023, she worked as the cultural and communications officer at the *Central Council of Jews in Germany*. After an eight-month stint as Head of Press and Public Relations for the Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion in Berlin, she started working for *Institut für Neue Soziale Plastik* in July 2024. In addition to her work as an author, she works as an executive coach and moderator, and is currently completing advanced training as a systemic supervisor.

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Tacoma Narrows Bridge Collapse, 1940.
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ישראל - גרמניה
ISRAEL - DEUTSCHLAND
1965 - 2025



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Resonances occur when a system capable of vibrating is set into vibration by an external influence, the frequency of which matches the system's own. The vibrations intensify, and – for instance – harmonious sounds can arise.

The Tacoma Narrows Bridge in Washington State collapsed on 7th November 1940 – just a few months after its opening. The wind had set it into vibrations that continued to build until the bridge finally collapsed. The structure succumbed to what is known as a resonance disaster: When a system capable of vibration is externally stimulated at its natural frequency,

the vibrations become increasingly stronger until the material's load limit is exceeded and the structure is ultimately destroyed. Due to its lightweight construction, the bridge was unable to withstand the intense vibrations and dynamic loads.

German-Israeli cultural relations resemble a vibrating system: Resonances arise here – that is, exchange and interactions, impulses and amplification, new vibrations. At the same time, the cultural bridges are fragile because even small external impulses can have major effects – and ultimately pose the risk of the bridges collapsing.