

The Ontological Security of Special Relationships: The Case of Germany and Israel

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Introduction

Fifty years after the establishment of official diplomatic relations in 1965, the German-Israeli partnership is thriving in many areas. Annual cabinet-level meetings, joint armament projects and extensive cultural and youth exchange programs are only some of the most eye-catching manifestations of this extraordinary relationship. For leading German representatives such as Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier or Federal President Joachim Gauck, the close partnership with Israel is a “miracle” (Auswärtiges Amt 2015a; Welt 2015). Scholars and media commentators describe it as one of only a few „special relationships“ that constitute a microstructure separate from the rest of international politics (Gardner Feldman 1984; Borck 2014; Economist 2015).

On closer inspection, the ‘miracle’ of German-Israeli relations has multiple dimensions: First, there is Israel’s readiness after World War II to accept the young Federal Republic as a negotiation partner despite the Holocaust. Second, one is intrigued by the endurance of the relationship in the face of major domestic and international transformations, including several Israeli-Arab wars, the end of the Cold War, German unification, the Middle East peace process and changing governments and party political landscapes in both countries. Third, observers will note Germany’s unwavering commitment to the relationship, notwithstanding the asymmetries in material power and economic interdependence in its favor.

The article addresses these puzzles in German-Israeli relations and seeks to contribute to the study of special relationships in international politics more broadly. Specifically, we suggest linking the analysis of special relationships to the growing research agenda on ontological security in international relations (Bially-Mattern 2001; Stelle 2005; Mitzen 2006a; Subotic 2015). It is our contention that this advances our understanding of the emergence, stability and maintenance of special relationship and sheds new light on power relations between the partners of such relationships. In addition to the intrinsic significance of German-Israeli relations, this case is particularly well-suited for our theoretical purposes for two main reasons. First, the German-Israeli relationship, alongside Anglo-American and US-Israeli relations, ranks as a prime and relatively uncontested example of special relationships in international politics (Gardner-Feldman 1984; Pallade 2005; Heil 2011; Borck 2014). The political dynamics and power relations we are interested in should therefore be comparatively easy to observe. A second methodological advantage of the case is that it minimizes problems of equifinality. As we will show below, the main IR paradigms all make different predictions about the relationship compared to the approach suggested here. The focus on German-Israeli relations thus helps illuminate both the distinctiveness of our theoretical argument and its usefulness in addressing as yet unresolved empirical questions in the context of special relationships.

We will proceed in five steps. The analysis starts with a short discussion of the concept of special relationships in international politics. The next section identifies the shortcomings of existing approaches in explaining the emergence and stability of the German-Israeli special relationship and of power asymmetries within these relations. The article then moves on to situate our theoretical argument within the ontological security literature. Finally, we apply the suggested conceptual framework to the German-Israeli case. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and suggests avenues for future research.

Special Relationships in International Relations

Ever since Winston Churchill described the relations between Britain and the United States as a *special relationship* in his famous “iron curtain” speech on 5 March 1946, the term has become widely used in political and academic discourse. Specifically, the relations between Britain and the United States have easily sparked more sustained academic interest in the quality, character and development of this *special relationship* than any other interstate relationship in the international system (Reynolds 1986; Ovendale 1998; Dumbrell 2006; Marsh/Baylis 2006). However, the term is by no means reserved for Anglo-American relations, but has, apart from the German-Israeli relationship under study here, also been applied to, for example, the relations of the United States to Canada (Dickey 1975) or Australia (Brummer 2015) as well as to Germany’s relations to France or Poland (Gardner Feldman 2012).

Unfortunately, however, the popularity of the concept of special relationships by far exceeds its analytical clarity or precision. It is being used in many different ways and from various theoretical perspectives (Harnisch 2015). Since definitions of the concept are often ad-hoc and unsystematic, it remains surprisingly vague and ambiguous. A case in point are the ten quite arbitrary criteria for special relationships which Alex Danchev (1996: 743) has drawn from his work on UK-US relations. Still, existing scholarship points us to the following building blocks for such a definition (see also Harnisch 2015). First, the concept of special relationships starts out from a state-centric perspective on international politics. While the term has occasionally been applied to relationships which include non-state actors, for example the relations between the EU and the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific states (Schieder 2015), it is predominantly taken to refer exclusively to relations between states. To be sure, such relations may come to be seen as special partly because of particular links or sentiments on the level of society. The set of relations itself which is analysed as special relationships, however, is generally limited to interstate relations. What is more, the concept tends to be used with reference to relations between exactly two states. In general, therefore, special relationships are seen as a particular subset of bilateral interstate relations (Gardner Feldman 1984: 7).

Second, special relationships are particularistic and rest on a logic of inclusion and exclusion. They express a qualitative difference between the relations of states inside and outside of them. Although special relationships by definition involve the demarcation from other states which are not part of these relations, they do not necessarily rely on processes of “negative othering” (Campbell 1998; Weldes 1999). In other words, special relationships exclude other states, but they do not in the first instance define themselves against those other states (see also Berenskoetter 2007: 659). What is important, however, is that the members of a special relationship recognise the specialness of the relationship and that they ascribe particular significance to it relative to their relations with other states. Similarly, the special character of a relationship tends to be acknowledged also by outsiders to the relationship. Since special relations are therefore implicitly defined in comparison to a state’s other relationships and seen to stand apart from these relationships, it follows that states can always only have a limited number of relations which qualify as special.

Third, special relationships distinguish themselves positively from other relationships. They are thus typically regarded as being particularly close, cooperative, trustful and intimate. More specifically, they build on mutual expectations of preferential treatment. This is not to deny that relationships between states may also negatively distinguish themselves from other relationships in the sense of being particularly confrontational or hostile. Relationships of enmity (Wendt 1999: 260-263) and “enduring rivalries” (Chan 2013) are cases in point (see also Harnisch 2015). It is important to note, however, that such “negative” relationships are not normally discussed as special relationships. Following the common usage of the term and for the purposes of terminological clarity and precision, the concept of special relationships should

therefore be reserved for relations between states which compare *positively* with other interstate relations.

Finally, an important characteristic of special relationships is their durability and endurance. Members of special relationships as well as outsiders do not regard them as partnerships of a temporary nature, but rather as relatively stable fixtures in international politics. Special relationships constitute patterns of interaction which at least have the potentiality to permanently set them apart from their international environment. What should therefore be seen as a critical litmus test of special relationships is their capacity to withstand crises and to outlive shifts in the interests and capabilities of its members (Gardner Feldman 1984: 252; see also Bially-Mattern 2001). In view of these four building blocks of special relations, a working definition of the concept would be to understand special relationships as *exclusive and relatively durable bilateral relations between states in the international system which are based on mutual expectations of preferential treatment and which are recognised by its members and by outsiders as being qualitatively distinct from other interstate relations in international politics*.

Along these lines, it is also possible to distinguish special relationships from related concepts such as alliances, security communities and friendship. First, unlike special relationships alliances may involve more than two states, are specifically formed for the purposes of security cooperation against an external threat and thus at least partly rely on “negative othering” (Snyder 1997: 4; Walt 1987: 6-13). Second, security communities, like alliances, extend beyond bilateral relations and are defined strictly in relation to security issues. Specifically, the concept is focused on mutual expectations of non-violent dispute settlement among its members and places greater emphasis than special relationships on collective identities as necessary preconditions for the development of security communities (Adler/Barnett 1998: 29-48). Finally, the concept which probably comes closest to special relationships is friendship in international politics (Roshchin 2006; Smith 2011). Unlike friendships, however, special relationships do not presuppose an understanding of partners as equals but can include highly asymmetric relations between states which recognise each other as junior and senior partners to the relationship. Also, special relationships do not necessarily have to operate on a strictly non-utilitarian logic of reciprocity which is essential to true friendship but can build on more instrumental expectations of mutual benefit (Berenskoetter 2007: 666-667).

The concept of special relationships is thus analytically distinct from related concepts in the field and promises to capture a particular subset of relations between states in international politics. The study of such relationships is firmly located on the interaction level of analysis in-between the unit and the structural level. This level of analysis focuses attention on patterns of interaction between states which can neither be fully accounted for by the attributes of the interacting units nor deduced from the macro-structure of the international system. For one thing, special relationships are being created, reproduced and potentially transformed by the foreign policy practices of their members. At the same time, special relationships are practices of interaction which constitute the micro-structure of the international system. They shape the identities and interests of their members and contribute to the production and re-production of the macro-structures of the international system (Wendt 1999: 145-150).

The Puzzle of the German-Israeli Special Relationship

Given our definition of the concept, the starting assumption of the article is that German-Israeli relations are a largely uncontested and widely acknowledged example of a special relationship in international politics. Amongst other things, the ‘specialness’ of the partnership is indicated by the institutionalization and frequency of official political interactions, including annual meetings at cabinet-level and reciprocal invitations to speak in front of the Knesset and the

German Bundestag. Diplomatically, key indicators for the special quality of the relationship also include Germany's role as the second most important supplier of weapons to Israel and its steadfast support for Israel in multilateral forums such as the United Nations or the European Union. Economically, Israel is Germany's most important trading partner in the Middle East, and Germany is Israel's third most important trading partner overall. On the societal level, key pointers to the specialness of the relationship are the broad range of well-developed forms of cooperation and partnership in civil society, including the German-Israeli society, the German-Israeli Future Forum, the extensive youth exchanges between the two countries as well as the Minerva Foundation and the close collaboration between the two countries in education and research (Kloke 2005; Asseburg/Busse 2011; Heil 2011).

Moreover, the German-Israeli special relationship has clearly stood the test of time. It has outlived major transformations in its international environment, including the end of the Cold War and German unification and it has weathered various crises in German-Israeli relations, such as the discovery of German rocket scientists working in Egypt in the 1950s, the controversies surrounding the statute of limitations on Nazi war crimes in the 1960s, the fallout between Chancellor Schmidt and Prime Minister Begin in the late 1970s, the aborted sale of German tanks to Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s or most recently the German criticism against Israel's policy of settlement constructions in the West Bank (Gardner Feldman 1984; Lau 2011). What all these crises have in common is that they were not only resolved, but quickly followed by mutual re-assurances of the specialness of German-Israeli relations.

Most significantly, however, the special relationship between Germany and Israel is routinely identified as such by both partners (Lavy 1996: 207). References to the specialness of the relations are common diplomatic practice within the relationship. In fact, there are few speeches on German-Israeli relations from high-level representatives of the two countries which do not in some way or the other include such references. A case in point is the 2008 visit to Israel by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, when both the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the German Chancellor went out of their way to praise the special quality of the relationship (Putz 2008). In the words of Chancellor Merkel (2008) in the Knesset:

“Germany and Israel are and will always remain linked in a special way by the memory of the Shoah. [...] Yes, our relations are special, indeed unique – marked by enduring responsibility for the past, shared values, mutual trust, abiding solidarity for one another and shared confidence.”

What is more, these sentiments are widely shared by outside observers and commentators (Berenskoetter 2012a) who tend to rank the relationship as one of only very few special relations the two countries have. For Germany, relations to Israel are seen in a line with two or at most three other special relations to France, the US and Poland (Gardner Feldman 1999; Nonnenmacher 2010). In the case of Israel, relations to Germany often count as its second most important special relationship after relations to the US (Economist 2008: 32). Few would disagree, therefore, with the Economist's (2015: 34) recent characterisation of German-Israeli relations as a “very special relationship”.

How can we explain the endurance of these special ties in the face of changing domestic and international circumstances? And what accounts for the emergence of the German-Israeli special relationship in the first place? In the remainder of this section, we show that major IR paradigms (neorealism, liberalism and constructivism) offer at best incomplete explanations of the initialization of special ties between Germany and Israel. They also fail to make sense of the stability of the German-Israeli relationship in general and Germany's continued commitment to it in particular.

Starting with a neorealist take on these issues, the emphasis is on capabilities, the distribution of relative gains and national interests. Such reasoning is not entirely implausible if the focus is on the origins of the special relationship. Specifically, Germany's efforts at establishing a bilateral partnership with Israel might partly be explained by the nexus between German-Israeli reconciliation and Germany's reintegration into the international community (Gardner Feldman 1999: 340; 1984: 51-52). Israel, for her part, was so much in need of economic and financial aid that it was arguably in her interest to reciprocate Germany's advances (Gardner Feldman 1984: 51, 66, 70; Jelinek 2004: 93, 181). The blind spot of this rational-choice perspective, however, is the moral case against deeper Israeli-German cooperation of a powerful domestic opposition in Israel particularly in the 1950s (Jelinek 2004: 150-156). As our analysis will show, moral reasoning was also important in internal debates between German decision-makers. What is more, US diplomacy towards the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s was quite ambivalent and hegemonic pressure from the US was therefore unlikely a decisive influence on Germany's Israel policy in these years (Hindenburg 2007: 97). Thus, realist explanations face some disconfirming evidence already when it comes to the emergence of the German-Israeli special relationship.

Furthermore, what poses anomalies to neorealist accounts are Germany's continuing commitment to its special relations with Israel as well as its generous military aid programs up and until the present day. Germany, after all, disposes of far superior fiscal and economic resources particularly after reunification (Baumann et al. 2001: 58-63). Neorealist theories would, therefore, have predicted a weakening of Germany's attachment to its relationship with Israel. Since the end of the Cold War, Germany also finds itself in a comparatively benign geopolitical situation. Israel, in contrast, is being surrounded by hostile and/or fragile regimes. Given these capability gaps and uneven security needs, Germany should be able to apply considerable bargaining power in its relations with Israel. A neorealist analysis would therefore expect that German Israeli relations are marked by asymmetric negotiation outcomes that favor Germany, not Israel, an expectation that has often proven wrong by the empirical record (see below).

In addition, the neorealist perspective would suggest that Germany has actually much to lose from its close partnership with Israel. Given the hostility of Islamic fundamentalist movements and violent extremists towards Israel, the German-Israeli partnership might be seen to entail higher risks to forward-deployed German armed forces in countries such as Lebanon, Turkey and Somalia. Arguably, the relationship also increases risks to German tourists and citizens in the Middle East. What is more, the German-Israeli alliance entails entrapment risks (Snyder 1984: 467), i.e. the risk of being instrumentalized and of inadvertently becoming a party to conflicts between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Finally, a rationalist cost-benefit analysis of German-Israeli relations would also have to consider opportunity costs regarding Germany's relations to the Arab world, ranging from industrial tenders and the market chances of German products to counterterrorism and immigration control. In combination, these factors make it implausible to assume that Germany receives unambiguous material security or economic benefits from its special relationship with Israel. Neorealism can therefore neither account for the endurance of this relationship nor for the distribution of relative gains within it.

Turning to liberal perspectives on German-Israeli relations, the focus shifts to societal influences and business ties. Back in the 1950s and early 1960s, German civil society (intellectuals, student initiatives, trade unions, churches) pushed for the diplomatic recognition of Israel (von Hindenburg 2007). It seems questionable, however, to reduce key decision-makers within the Adenauer administration who developed their own understanding of Germany's responsibility towards Israel to a passive "transmission belt" (Moravcsik 1999: 518) of societal preferences. Liberal bottom-up accounts are therefore incomplete and need to be supplemented by taking into account elite views and intra-administrative struggles.

Moreover, liberal perspectives are correct in pointing to the stabilizing effects for the relationship of student and youth exchanges as well as scientific and cultural cooperation which complement intergovernmental links with civil society bonds up to the present day. Given that, quantitatively speaking, Israeli civil society is much more involved in transnational interactions with actors in Germany than vice versa, however, this hardly explains the endurance of Germany's particular commitment to relations with Israel. For example, in 2014 438 German students and academics in Israel and 298 Israeli students and academics in Germany were supported by the German Academic Exchange Program (DAAD 2015). Against the backdrop of a total number of about 2 600 000 German (Statistisches Bundesamt 2015a) and 300 000 Israeli students (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011) these numbers are rather insignificant, at least with respect to German tertiary education. Even more tellingly, there is a striking imbalance of tourist visits. Whereas nearly 870 000 Israeli tourists stayed overnight in Germany in 2014 (The Jewish Press 2015), only 196 000 German tourists came to visit Israel despite Germany's almost tenfold population (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). If one assumes that travelling to or working in a partner country has the strongest possible impact on individual level perceptions, much more than receiving visitors from the country, Israelis should be expected to be more attached to Germany than the other way round. Thus, the structure of civil society interactions runs opposite to the structure of normative commitments within the German-Israeli special relationship (see below).

A similar argument applies to German-Israeli commercial relations and business ties. Following the assumptions of commercial liberalism (Moravcsik 1999: 528-530), the hypothesis would be that the special relationship is a function of bilateral trade, joint ventures and other corporate collaborations. The more profitable these interactions, the more vigorously domestic business associations should lobby their governments to intensify and stabilize the partnership, for instance by funding bilateral R&D programs. Again, such reasoning is made implausible by taking into account the asymmetry of commercial exchanges. While Germany is Israel's third most important trading partner, after China and the United States, Israel ranks only 41st on the list of German trading partners, behind Saudi-Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Statistisches Bundesamt 2015b; Auswärtiges Amt 2015b). Put differently, a worsening of German-Israeli relations would cause comparatively few externalities to German industry. Business interests can therefore not explain the depth and endurance of the partnership, let alone Germany's particular commitment to it.

A further blow to liberal attempts to account for the German-Israeli special relationship is delivered by public opinion data. While recent polls show that Israelis perceive Germany as their favorite country in Europe, a relative majority of Germans is critical of Israel and characterizes the country as "aggressive". What is more, 58 percent of Germans want to "draw a line" under the Holocaust, and 60 percent do not see any special obligations of their country towards Israel (The Economist 2015; Die Welt 2012). In consequence, German governments nowadays have few electoral incentives to maintain special relations with Israel. To the contrary, the assumption of a bottom-up link between public preferences and foreign policy making would rather support the expectation of deteriorating German-Israeli relations which the empirical record does not seem to indicate. Moreover, the liberal logic of two-level games implies that leaders who depend on cooperation-skeptical publics, all things being equal, enjoy greater bargaining power than those who are less constrained by domestic preferences (Putnam 1988: 440). Such an account, however, fails to explain why Israel, not Germany, often had the upper hand in bilateral negotiations.

Finally, constructivist perspectives on the German-Israeli special relationship would point to the significance of shared norms and values and to socialization through international and domestic institutions (Boekle/Rittberger/Wagner 2001). According to this perspective, the special relationship rests on similar normative outlooks and on mutual perceptions of each other

as trustworthy partners sharing a common identity that distinguishes German-Israeli relations from other international partnerships. Although contemporary Germany and Israel certainly share a democratic identity, a constructivist explanation of the specialness of their relationship to each other is ultimately unconvincing for at least two reasons. First, it cannot account for the emergence of the special relationship in the 1950s and 1960s when the recent experience of the Holocaust made the bilateral (re-)production of a Hobbesian culture of enmity (Wendt 251-278) appear far more likely. The tradition of political authoritarianism in Germany as well as Israel's Kibbutz socialism may have further limited the range of common values at that time.

Second, constructivist assumptions are difficult to reconcile with the puzzling stability of the German-Israeli partnership despite some fundamental normative disagreements. In particular, while Israel has a record of using force in self-defence against Arab neighbors, violent militias and terrorist organizations, often in anticipation of attacks, Germany still displays a culture of military restraint (Maull 2001; Longhurst 2004; Malici 2006). Although Germany's reluctance to countenance the use of military means has gradually weakened since reunification, the German political discourse is still highly skeptical of the legitimacy and appropriateness of military force in international politics and does not easily condone violations of international humanitarian law. Israel, on the other hand, for understandable reasons tends to prioritize security over international legitimacy. There is, thus, a wide gap between Germany and Israel in terms of normative views about the use of force in international politics (Wolfssohn/Brechenmacher 2007: 519-520). How Israel conducted counterterrorism operations in Gaza only reinforced differences in this regard (Spiegel 2014).

Another indicator for diverging socialization experiences and consequent normative differences relates to German and Israeli views on uni- and multilateralism. On the one hand, the Federal Republic has always been keen to tie itself to multilateral or supranational institutions, such as the European Union and the International Criminal Court. What may have initially been driven by opportunistic reasons has since developed into a prescriptive and internalized foreign policy norm. Constructivist scholarship has shown that Germany has remained committed to this norm and its "reflexive multilateralism" (Bulmer 1997) even after reunification (Duffield 1999: 781-782; Rudolf 2005). Israel, in contrast, prioritizes bilateral partnerships with different countries, above all the United States, but has abstained from many international institutions, such as the Nonproliferation Treaty or the International Criminal Court. It did so partly as a result of hostile and hypocritical coalitions against it, for example in the UN, and partly because of a lack of trust in international promises against the backdrop of the Holocaust. As a result, Israel has not become socialized as much as Germany into multilateral norms. Given these very different normative outlooks and world views in German and Israeli foreign policy, it is implausible to argue that the German-Israeli special relationship is driven and sustained by shared norms and values that distinguish the relationship from other bilateral relations between democratic countries.

Summing up, existing theoretical approaches to the German-Israeli special relationship cannot convincingly explain its emergence. They are even less successful in making sense of the stability of German-Israeli relations and in identifying the mechanisms by which it is maintained. Also, the neorealist and the liberal perspectives would expect a dominant role of Germany in this relationship, whereas, in fact, it is marked more by imbalances that favor Israel. The next section will make the case that a more promising theoretical perspective on German-Israeli relations starts out from the concept of ontological security. Such a perspective assumes that states act as if they were motivated primarily by ontological security seeking and regards special relationships as patterns of interaction which help states fulfil their ontological security needs. The suggested theoretical framework also promises to address gaps in existing research about special relationships more broadly, in particular regarding the emergence and stability of

special relationships, the processes by which states keep them up over time and power relations within such relationships (Brummer et al. 2015).

Special Relationships and Ontological Security

Ontological security refers to an actor's "stable sense of self-identity" which comes from a "sense of continuity and order in events" (Giddens 1991: 54, 243). The agency of actors depends on such ontological security because it stabilises their cognitive environment and reduces uncertainty which is a necessary precondition for purposeful behaviour. Ontological security prevents actors from being paralysed and incapacitated by fundamental anxieties of not knowing how to cope with potential but unspecified threats and risks and of being overwhelmed by external events. In contrast, permanent awareness of the limitless and unpredictable dangers which actors may be confronted with at any time makes it very difficult for them to decide on any sensible course of action at all. Like physical security, ontological security is a primary need of any social actor because it is constitutive of their capacity to act (Mitzen 2006b: 272-273).

Social actors achieve ontological security by developing a "protective cocoon" (Giddens 1991: 40), their basic trust system, which allows them to bracket knowledge of potential threats to their self-identity and thus to reduce uncertainty. Ontologically secure actors take the existential parameters of their actions for granted and trust in the overall cognitive stability of their environment. The key mechanism through which actors generate such basic trust, in turn, is the routinisation of social relationships to significant others (Mitzen 2006a: 346-347). Routinized social relations involve habitual patterns of interaction and are an important source of cognitive certainty. They are essential defences of social actors against threats to their self-identity. Since the routines embedded in social relationships are thus crucial anchors of an actor's sense of self, they become loaded with emotional significance. In other words, actors become attached to routinized social relations because of their anxiety that on the other side of these routines "chaos lurks" (Giddens 1991: 36). The ontological security needs of actors are thus an important cognitive-affective stabiliser of their social relations (Mitzen 2006b: 271-272). At the same time, the very reliance of actors on routinized social relations as a source of their ontological security links the fulfilment of their ontological security needs and their self-identity to the appraisal of significant others and to the predictable behaviour of their partners within routinized relationships (Giddens 1991: 38).

Starting out from an understanding of states as social actors, the assumption that states act in the international system "as if" they were ontological security-seekers (Mitzen 2006a: 352) has already proven useful in investigating different patterns of interstate relations in international politics. Most notably, this analytical perspective has shed important new light on conflictual dynamics such as the security dilemma (Mitzen 2006a) as well as on the foundations of interstate friendship (Berenskoetter 2007). Following this line of argument, the article suggests that the assumption of states as ontological security-seekers can also be usefully applied to the analysis of special relationships such as German-Israeli relations. Specifically, the argument is that the ontological security needs of states can usefully be seen as the most fundamental "motivational glue" (Mitzen 2006b: 279) to their special relationships and that this assumption provides a promising theoretical starting point for studying the emergence and durability of such relationships in international politics as well as asymmetric power relations within them. Thus, states establish special relationships at least partly because of the ontological security they provide and they keep them up over time because they become attached to the routines embedded in these relationships. This analytical approach appears to have at least three distinct advantages over more traditional perspective on special relationships which would emphasise

the role of material power capabilities, mutual interests or shared values and norms (see Harnisch 2015).

First, the approach sheds new light on the motivations behind the establishment of special relationships and is uniquely positioned to account for their stability and durability. It is precisely the endurance of special relationships in the face of power shifts or changes in the interests or normative outlooks of their partners which is one of their core features and which remains a puzzle for existing accounts. Cases in point are studies which have long predicted the demise of the Anglo-American special relationship (Dickie 1994; Wallace 2005) or which argue that the US no longer feel bound by this relationship (Wallace/Phillips 2009: 282-283). In contrast, the ontological security perspective would emphasise the intrinsic emotional attachment of states to the routines and cognitive certainty of special relationships and thus predict the stability of such relationships as well as their capacity to outlive changes in their environment. Notably, ontological security-seekers should be motivated to stabilise their special relationships in particular in critical situations which threaten their self-identity even if material or normative incentives for doing so are weak or ambiguous (Steele 2005: 538). This motivation should be particularly strong in special relationships which have emerged at least partly to satisfy the ontological security needs of their partners. At the same time, states are expected to have the capacity to reflexively monitor the routines embedded in a special relationship and to update and restructure them accordingly (Mitzen 2006b: 350-351). The partners of a special relationship should be able to cope with the uncertainties that come with such adjustments insofar as they trust that routinized relations will be re-established and that the “specialness” of the relationship is not put into doubt.

Second, the assumption of states as ontological security-seekers is useful for understanding the processes through which special relationships are being maintained which has been identified as a major research gap in the field. Specifically, it makes sense of the mutual assurances and symbolic affirmations of the special quality of a relationship which are often integral to the routines of a special relationship, not least as a means of overcoming crises. Such assurances and affirmations should therefore not be seen as inconsequential rhetoric and mere window-dressing, but as serving the ontological security needs of the partners in a special relationship and thus as part and parcel of the value these partners attach to their relationship.

Third, the concept of ontological security opens up new perspectives on power relations within special relationships. Specifically, the dependence of the partners on a special relationship for their ontological security may well be asymmetrical in the sense that some actors may have more alternative sources of their ontological security and are less vulnerable in their self-identity than others. One partner to a special relationship may thus be more attached to it than the other. This partner should be expected to be particularly invested in the processes and practices of maintaining the special relationship. Insofar as states are aware of such asymmetries, moreover, they may be able to strategically exploit the ontological security needs of their partners. For example, they may accuse their partners of violating the expectations of a special relationship, potentially challenging their self-identity and threatening them with ontological insecurity. This, in turn, may “shame” a partner into adapting its behaviour in a way that benefits the other state and that sustains the special relationship (Steele 2005: 539). For one thing, such dynamics may be seen as a further stabiliser of special relationships. For another, they add a new dimension to attempts at understanding how and under what conditions “junior partners” to special relationships can succeed in influencing what must in a material sense be seen as the stronger partners in such relationships (for the UK-US special relationship, see for example Wallace/Phillips 2009).

In short, the theoretical contention of the article is that the assumption of states as ontological security-seekers provides a particularly promising analytical angle for studying special

relationships in international politics. The following section offers an empirical case study on German-Israeli relations which serves to illustrate our theoretical argument.

Ontological Security Seeking and the German-Israeli Special Relationship

The case study is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the emergence and stability of the special relationship. It will argue that ontological security was an important driver in establishing the relationship from the start and has been a key stabilizer of the relationship ever since, not least in the face of domestic and international crises. We also make the case that several instances of Israeli frustrations with Germany's perceived lack of commitment to the special relationship point not to German *realpolitik* but to the influence of countervailing ontological security pressures on German decision-makers, related in particular to German unification, European integration and reconciliation with Eastern Europe. These influences are thus endogenous not exogenous to our theoretical framework. The second part of the case study zooms in specifically on the practices of maintaining the special relationship. Our argument here is that these practices are driven by German and Israeli ontological security needs and are critical in sustaining the relationship. Finally, we turn to the power relations between Germany and Israel and argue that Israel has benefitted from asymmetries in the ontological security needs of the two partners which have enabled it to secure advantageous bargains in the special relationship.

Emergence and Stability of the German-Israeli Special Relationship

What led to the emergence of a German-Israeli special relationship? When do we first observe signs of ontological security seeking as a driving factor behind the actions of German decision-makers? A good analytical starting point probably is Chancellor Adenauer's acknowledgment of Germany's obligation to "moral and material reparations" to the Jewish people as a result of their "unmeasurable" suffering during Nazi rule (quoted in Jelinek 1997: 174). On this basis, the Israeli government agreed to enter into negotiations that eventually led to the Luxembourg accord of September 1952. In that agreement, Germany committed to pay Israel 3 billion Mark over 14 years as compensation for losses of Jewish livelihood and property during World War II (Belkin 2007: 2). Considering the hard bargaining of the German delegation (repeatedly trying to cut down Israeli demands and postponing a decision) and in particular the negotiation impasse from April to June 1952, one is easily led to discount any moral considerations on the German side (Gardner Feldman 1984: 62). This certainly applies to some German decision-makers, such as, for example, Finance Minister Fritz Schäffer and financial adviser Hermann Josef Abs, who both opposed the agreement up until the very end of the ratification process (Jelinek 2004: 179, 182-184). Schäffer even went so far as to say that "if the Jews want money, they should simply subscribe for an international loan" (quoted in Jelinek 2004: 191).

As far as Adenauer and other government members, including the Minister for the Economy and later Chancellor Erhard, are concerned, however, a mixture of opportunistic and moral motivations seems more plausible (Jelinek 2004: 102; Gardner Feldman 1999: 340; 1984: 49-53; Lavy 1996: 134). On the one hand, Adenauer was convinced of the existence of a strong Jewish lobby in the United States and calculated that material aid to Israel would be the price to pay for Germany to become a respected member within the international and transatlantic communities (Weingardt 2002: 74; Jelinek 2004: 46, 67, 86-87, 113, 185-186, 202). On the other hand, the Chancellor, at the start of negotiations, emphasized the unique responsibility of the Federal Republic towards Israel in internal government communications (Jelinek 2004: 161). He also established a trustful, even friendly, relationship with the President of the World Jewish Congress, Nahum Goldman, whom he assured that he regarded reparations a "honorable

duty of the German people” (quoted in Jelinek 1997: 178). Therefore, he ignored a skeptical public opinion and at critical points in time went against key figures in his cabinet and party by deciding to meet Israeli demands (see, for example, Jelinek 2004: 140-141; Weingardt 2002: 89).¹

As for the Israeli government, a first glimpse of what later emerged as a particular intimate, i.e. special, relationship was offered by Foreign Minister Sharett who honored the Luxembourg accord as “unique in the history of international relations” (quoted in Jelinek 1997: 205). What is more, the bilateral relationship was called “special” by Israeli officials in internal deliberations already in October 1953, even though the term had no positive connotation at that time (quoted in Jelinek 1997: 248). During the implementation phase of the Luxembourg agreement, the German government, much to the surprise of Israel, took all efforts to fulfill its obligations, despite numerous Arab interventions (Weingardt 2002: 99-103; Jelinek 1997: 211-212). Furthermore, the nascent German-Israeli relationship passed a critical litmus test during the Suez Crisis, when the United States urged Germany to threaten Israel with suspending the delivery of goods and aid in order to force it to withdraw from the Sinai. The German government, however, publicly denied that it would even consider such a move (Jelinek 2004: 298-299; 1997: 443; Weingardt 2002: 113). What is more, Adenauer, in confidential talks with the head of the Israel Mission in Cologne, declared Israel’s intervention legitimate (Jelinek 1997: 417).

Given that a rather isolated Israel was heavily dependent on German aid, the German government’s de facto positioning in favor of Israel essentially undermined the US strategy of economic sanctions (Hansen 2000: 26). Partly as a result of this risky decision to go against the will of its US protector, something that is unparalleled in the history of the Federal Republic’s early foreign policy, even political opponents of Adenauer confirmed the authenticity of the chancellors’ moral commitment to *Shilumim*, as Ben Gurion explained to fellow party members:

My estimate [of Adenauer’s attitude] is based on information received from his German and Austrian political opponents [...] The Israel issue is a question of conscience and religion to him (quoted in Jelinek 1997: 476).

Not only in talks with their Israeli counterparts but also vis-à-vis third parties, German representatives in the 1950s emphasized Germany’s “moral obligation” to Israel and a “very special character” of the German-Israeli relationship (foreign minister Heinrich von Brentano in talks with the ambassador of Iraq, quoted in Jelinek 1997: 447). American sources also testified that at least some key figures in the Adenauer administration truly believe in a moral obligation to Israel (see Jelinek 1997: 442).

On the issue of entering into official German-Israeli diplomatic relations, however, the German government in the mid-1950s was no longer prepared to take the initiative even though this became a growing cause for disappointment and anger on the Israeli side (Jelinek 2004: 276-289; Weingardt 2002: 106-112).² Rational-choice explanations would point to structural incentives from the bipolar international system and to the importance of German-Arab business ties to explain this behavior. We argue, however, that at the heart of the matter was a

¹ It bears mentioning that Adenauer was not simply responding to allied pressure. Several US administrations, as well as the UK government, sent rather mixed signals in the years preceding the Luxemburg agreement because they feared that, ultimately, allied taxpayers would have to pay for it (Jelinek 2004: 97, 102).

² Back in 1952, Germany had approached Israel with an initiative to establish official diplomatic relations. At that point, however, massive protests against any official contacts with German leaders had made it impossible for Israeli decision-makers to positively respond to the German approach. Since the mid-1950s, roles were reversed and Israel, after very emotional and painful deliberations, began to call for full-blown diplomatic relations.

clash of moral obligations and identity needs. West Germany's political establishment, following historicist ideas about state- and nationhood, saw the Federal Republic as only a transitory entity whose primary responsibility was to restore German unity, at least in the long run (von Hindenburg 2007: 20-26). Following to this reasoning, anything that would compromise the Federal Republic's ability to speak on behalf of all Germans needed to be avoided. Against this backdrop, Arab states threatened to recognize the GDR should West Germany deepen its relationship with Israel. As a result, the German leadership felt unable to establish official diplomatic relations with Israel without failing to meet its perceived obligations to Germans on both sides of the iron curtain (von Hindenburg 2007: 54).

Israel, for her part, protested not only against Germany's indecisive diplomacy but also against the continued presence of German rocket scientists in Egypt and the Federal Republic's unwillingness to extend the statute of limitations for murder (von Hindenburg 2007: 68-84). At the same time, it is indicative of the importance Israel attributed to the bilateral relationship that there was no breakup of bilateral contacts as a consequence of these disagreements. One reason might be secret arms transfers with which West Germany sought to compensate Israel for its policy of non-recognition after 1957 (Wolffsohn/Brechenmacher 2007: 509). While internal documents of the German Foreign Ministry show the predominance of quid-pro-quo thinking behind such offers and the granting of financial aid, many German parliamentarians perceived the above-mentioned issues "exclusively from the viewpoint of the German people's moral burden", as one government official complained (quoted in von Hindenburg 2007: 75). Hence, these episodes show both the emergence and the limited influence of an identity component underlying Germany's Israel policy up to the early 1960s.

What contributed to the eventual decision to end the anomaly of increasingly special but unofficial relations was a slow readjustment of Germany's ontological security needs encouraged by parts of West German civil society. Starting already in the early 1950s, writers, student organizations, church groups, and trade unions pushed for a new kind of political thinking, enabling a separate West German identity that was wedded to the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ('coming to terms with the past') and a moral commitment to reconciliation and historical justice towards Israel (von Hindenburg 2007: 26-34, 50-54, 114-117; Jelinek 2004: 126, 128). In the early 1960s, leading parliamentary figures from both major parties came out in support of the pro-Israel movement and prioritized reconciliation over national interests and the idea of representing the whole German nation (*Alleinvertretungsanspruch*) (von Hindenburg: 63-66, 114). Eventually, it was both the need of living up to the promise of an ethically transformed Germany and the prospect of thereby increasing popular support that motivated Chancellor Erhard to change course, offering the exchange of ambassadors to Israel in March 1965 (von Hindenburg 2007: 146-155).

In the bilateral negotiations following this offer, Germany still sought to appease Arab countries by refusing to publicly confirm the special character of the German-Israel relationship. But after Israel insisted on such a characterization, Erhard, in a note accompanying the agreement, affirmed that his country "was aware of the peculiar position of Germans in relation to Jews all over the world, including in Israel" (quoted in von Hindenburg 2007: 162). Fear of hostile Arab reactions also prevented the new CDU-SPD grand coalition government from officially siding with Israel in the 1967 war. Foreign Minister Brandt however was eager to explain that in this case "nonintervention and neutrality in terms of international law should not be seen as equivalent to moral indifference and insensible hearts" (Deutscher Bundestag 1967: 5304). In order to contribute to the security of Israeli citizens, Germany shipped trucks and gas masks to Israel and logistically supported the delivery of US-manufactured weapons through German territory (Weingardt 2002: 190). Six years later in the Yom Kippur War, under much different domestic and international circumstances, Germany not only remained silent about US weapon deliveries via Bremerhaven until Israel gained the upper hand, but secretly provided electronic

equipment to Israel (Harpprecht 2000). Out of the same concern for Israel's security, German governments in the 1970s and 1980s, although they sought to convince Israel to commence peace talks with Palestinian representatives, refrained from acknowledging the PLO as long as the organization remained committed to the elimination of Israel (Weingardt 2002: 281-282).

While in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s German public opinion facilitated a deepening of political relations with Israel, from the 1970s onwards it needed to be occasionally sidelined in order to sustain the special relationship. The fact that German governments in the 1970s and 1980s refused to reconsider their relationship with Israel despite growing domestic criticism particularly against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and, later, its military campaign against Lebanon in 1982 lends further credibility to the argument that ontological security seeking has emerged as a significant driver behind Germany's policy towards Israel in this period. In addition, Germany, because of its oil-dependency, faced strong economic incentives to side with Arab countries and to withdraw support from Israel. Yet Chancellor Brandt, even though he promoted a "balanced approach" in the Middle East and pursued the reestablishment of official diplomatic relations with Arab states, never went so far as to deny a special obligation to Israel. To the contrary, Brandt reemphasized the special character of German-Israeli relations on numerous occasions (Weingardt 2002: 210; Schmidt 2014).

In particular, his historic gesture of humility toward the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto uprisings in December 1970 gained him much respect in Tel Aviv. This was true also for his Cologne speech of 1971 in which he countered allegations that Israel would be a victim of his *Ostpolitik* by reaffirming that "nobody shall be exempt from the burden of history" and that "we cannot accept questioning Israel's right to exist" (quoted in Schmidt 2014: 83-85). It therefore was no coincidence that in June 1973, Brandt was the first acting Chancellor who visited Israel, even though only months before, the Israeli government had been outraged about the release of three of the Olympia 1972 terrorists. In Israel, Brandt successfully put an end to irritation about what some representatives of the German government, including foreign minister Scheel, meant by "normalization" and "normal relations" between Germany and Israel, clarifying that against the backdrop of Germany's history having "normal", i.e. institutionalized formal relationship with the Jewish state could never be taken for granted (quoted in Weingardt 2002: 223). Brandt also reaffirmed the "special historical and moral character" of German-Israeli relations while Aharon Yadlin, the general secretary of the Israeli Labor party, reminded him that "you will remain the people we are bound to through special relations, inevitably" (Strothmann 1973).

Brandt's successor, Helmut Schmidt, as well as foreign minister Genscher also repeatedly confirmed the special quality of German-Israeli relations. Schmidt had the honor to receive Yitzhak Rabin as the first Israeli Premier Minister to visit Germany which, according to Schmidt, was a visit "of a special kind" (quoted in Gardner Feldman 1984: 186). As a clear sign of preferential treatment, the Schmidt government in 1976 offered Israel a renewal of the bilateral economic aid program that resembled the very favorable conditions offered only to developing countries. At the same time, however, with Israel becoming a strong military and economic power in the Middle East and against the background of the Palestinian uprisings, German decision-makers updated their understanding of Germany's day-to-day obligations to Israel (Weingardt 2002: 338). Since Israel's survival appeared much less threatened than in the 1950s when it was internationally isolated and surrounded by stronger Arab nations, Germany felt able to take more critical positions towards Israeli policies without risking the security of the Jewish state and without violating core elements of its own national identity. Thus, while Germany's historic guilt required it to stand up for Israel's right to exist, as one SPD member of the *Bundestag* explained at the height of the 1982 Lebanon War, Israeli decision-makers should not expect their German ally to support each and every Israeli decision. Furthermore, the argument was made that Germany's "historical responsibility" indirectly also applied to the suffering of Arabs in the Middle East (Deutscher Bundestag 1982: 6343-6344).

In other words: This responsibility entailed a duty to contribute to a peaceful settlement in the region, something already implied by Brandt's Cologne speech in 1971. Although the new German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who came into office in 1983, initially caused some irritation because his dictum of the "*Gnade der späten Geburt*" (grace of late birth) appeared to question Germany's ongoing moral debts to Israel (Weingardt 2002: 305-312; Leinemann 1984), his government was subsequently quick to reaffirm Germany's commitment to the special relationship. For example, between 1982 and 1987 there have been on average five ministerial visits per year between the two countries (Weingardt 2002: 322) which shows how deeply engrained and routinized the special relations had by then become.

The basic stability of the German-Israeli special relationship in the 1970s and 1980s is even more remarkable in light of the increasing Europeanisation of Germany's Middle East policies (Gardner Feldman 1999: 356). Here, European integration as another source of the Federal Republic's ontological security seeking comes into play. The more Germany developed an identity as a European nation and the more it was eager to foster European unity also in the realm of foreign policy, the less it was able to pursue unilateral policies towards the Middle East. Consensus-seeking required finding common ground with some decisively pro-Arab countries, most importantly France (Weingardt 2002: 207-208). Thus, Germany, much to the dismay of Israel, subscribed to a number of EC declarations that called for an Israeli retreat from occupied territories and a resettlement of Palestinian refugees as well as for negotiations with the PLO. That being said, Israel was well aware that Germany repeatedly watered down pro-Arab declarations (Belkin 2007: 3; Weingardt 2002: 275). What is more, Germany, time and again, took care of Israeli economic interests, for example by successfully pushing for European-Israeli trade agreements in 1970 and 1975 or by putting on the agenda the establishment of a European-Israeli trade chamber in 1986 (Weingardt 2002: 267, 321; Schmidt 2014; Gardner Feldman 1999: 345). It is because of these efforts that Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 1999 called Germany "our good ambassador in Europe" (quoted in Asseburg/Busse 2011: 697).

Finally, new challenges for the special relationship appeared to arise with German reunification and Israeli fears that, in the words of Prime Minister Shamir, "a reunited Germany may constitute a new and deadly threat to all Jews" (quoted in Weingardt 2002: 334). In particular, when Gerhard Schröder took office in 1998 as the first German Chancellor without personal experience of WWII there were concerns that German decision-makers might place lesser emphasis on Germany's historical responsibilities. Yet once again, German governments worked to dispel such concerns and remained committed to the special relationship. Both Chancellor Schröder and foreign minister Fischer left no doubt that they accepted Germany's historical burden and that they regarded Israel as one of the most significant others when it came to defining Germany's foreign policy identity. For example, Schröder, already as SPD candidate for the chancellorship in the 1998 Bundestag elections, proved well aware of Germany's historic responsibility and made clear that he would aim to continue the special relationship with Israel (Jüdische Rundschau 1998). During his time in office, Schröder reaffirmed Germany's "particular responsibility", publicly ruled out any boycott or embargo against Israel and defended German military aid:

Let me say this in the most unmistakable manner: Israel will always get what it needs to uphold its security, at the time when it is needed (Deutscher Bundestag 2002: 23115)

The German government, in line with this promise, successfully blocked proposals for EU sanctions against Israel in 2002 (Belkin 2007: 9). Foreign minister Fischer later explained that

Germany unconditionally supports Israel's right of existence [...] This commitment to Israel is not attached to any reservations [...], is not negotiable and is the foundation

on which the special relationship between our two countries is built. It is a cornerstone of German foreign policy and will remain so (quoted in Britain Israel Communications & Research Center 2005).

The very fact that Germany and Israel, time and again, were able to defuse critical situations and to overcome policy disagreements underlines the ‘specialness’ of their relationship (De Vita 2015: 839). The resilience of German-Israeli relations derive from Germany’s ontological security needs and Israel’s readiness to contribute to fulfilling these needs. Both factors have become stronger, not weaker, over time. The historical record suggests that Germany’s ontological security needs were already part of the drivers behind the establishment of the special relationship after World War II. As German-Israeli relations developed, Germany’s ontological security became ever more entwined with this relationship which explains its unshakeable commitment to upholding the special relationship. Ontological security seeking has thus been central to the establishment and in particular the stability and endurance of the German-Israeli special relationship.

The Politics of Maintaining the Special Relationship

Understanding the German-Israeli special relationship from the perspective of the two countries’ ontological security needs sheds important new light on three interrelated practices of maintaining that relationship over time. These practices involve recurrent symbolic reaffirmations of the ‘specialness’ of the relationship; Israeli reminders of Germany’s moral debt to Israel; and the reflexive marginalization and de-legitimization of critics of the special relationship in German political discourse. Each of these practices reflect and further German and Israeli ontological security needs and, in combination, have been critical in sustaining the special relationship.

To begin with, German-Israeli relations are marked out by recurrent symbolic reaffirmations of the special bonds between the two countries. Such affirmations serve as mutual assurances and public commitments to the stability and continuity of the special relationship and are thus integral to the ontological security the relationship provides. Among the most significant examples for this practice in German-Israeli relations have been high-profile speeches of Israeli Presidents in the Bundestag and of German Presidents and Chancellors in the Knesset. While reciprocal invitations to speak to the Israeli and German parliaments are in themselves symbolic and public affirmations of the ‘specialness’ of the relationship, these occasions are also routinely used by both sides to emphasize the special character they ascribe to their relations.

Given that speeches of foreign leaders in the Bundestag are relatively rare, the fact that the German parliament has already been addressed by three Israeli Presidents is all the more remarkable. The first Israeli President to speak in the Bundestag was Ezer Weizman in 1996, followed by Moshe Katsav in 2005 and Shimon Peres on the occasion of the international Memorial Day for the victims of the Shoah in 2010. These speeches were recognized as highly symbolic events at the time and received exceptional attention in German public debate. They also followed a similar script in the sense that they all built bridges between the memory of the Holocaust and the good relations between Israel and Germany that have since developed. The Presidents brought back to life the “pillars of smoke from the Holocaust” (Weizman 1996) and the “memory of the atrocious past” (Peres 2010) which “can neither be forgiven nor excused” (Katsav 2005). They reminded their audiences of Germany’s historic guilt and its moral debt to Israel deriving from this guilt, but at the same time applauded the “new Germany” (Peres 2010) for recognizing its responsibilities and for being a reliable supporter of Israel. In particular, each President found ways to give expression to the closeness of what have become “special relations between Germany and Israel” (Katsav 2005). Thus, President Weizman (1996) thanked

Germany for the “friendship” between Israel and Germany and for the intimate cooperation between the two countries in “economic, security, cultural and many other fields”. President Peres (2010) explicitly linked the achievement of special relations to the remembrance of the past:

Unique ties developed between Germany and Israel. The friendship that was established did not develop at the expense of forsaking the memory of the Holocaust, but from the memory of the dark hours of the past. In view of the joint and decisive decision to look ahead – towards the horizon of optimistic hope.

Such Israeli affirmations of the special quality of German-Israeli relations have been significant external validations (Giddens 1991: 38) of Germany’s uncertain post-WW II identity, which is intrinsically linked to reconciliation with Israel, and thereby contributed to fulfilling Germany’s ontological security needs. That contribution has been recognized and valued, in turn, by German governments. In the words of Germany’s then foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, at the special session of the UN General Assembly on 24 January 2005 in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps: “The fact that Israel sees us as a reliable partner today is by no means to be taken for granted and fills us with profound gratitude” (UN General Assembly 2005: 18-19).

Similarly, post-WW II German self-identity has been externally validated by several invitations to German Heads of State or Government to visit Israel. These visits, in turn, have been regularly used to affirm that identity and to express Germany’s unwavering commitment to, in the words of Joachim Gauck, “the forever special German-Israeli friendship” (Bundespräsidialamt 2012). Among the most powerful occasions for such symbolic confirmations of the “special character” (Herzog 1994, quoted in Weingardt 2002: 359) of German-Israeli relations have been a number of high-profile speeches of German Presidents and Chancellors in front of the Knesset. Having been introduced by the Speaker of the Knesset, Abraham Burg, as “Israel’s greatest friend” (Kloke 2005), the speech delivered by President Johannes Rau in 2000 is a memorable case in point:

The relationship between our countries will always be special. In the knowledge of what has happened, we keep the memories alive. With the lessons of the past, we shape our common future. That is German-Israeli normality. [...] The shared responsibility for Israel is a fundamental principle of German foreign policy since the foundation of our State. (Bundespräsidialamt 2000)

Using similar language, President Horst Köhler in his 2005 speech to the Knesset described “the responsibility for the Shoah” as “part of German identity” and declared that “between Germany and Israel there cannot be what one calls normality” (Bundespräsidialamt 2005). Chancellor Angela Merkel also used her 2008 speech to Israel’s parliament, which was the first ever speech of a foreign Head of Government in the Knesset, to commit Germany in no uncertain terms to its “unique relationship” to Israel:

Germany and Israel are and will always remain linked in a special way by the memory of the Shoah. [...] Here of all places I want to explicitly stress that every German Government and every German Chancellor before me has shouldered Germany’s special historical responsibility for Israel’s security. This historical responsibility is part of my country’s *raison d’être*. [...] Yes, our relations are special, indeed unique – marked by enduring responsibility for the past, shared values, mutual trust, abiding solidarity for one another and shared confidence. [...] In this spirit, Germany will never forsake Israel but will remain a true friend and partner. (Bundesregierung 2008)

Moreover, such affirmations of the ‘specialness’ of German-Israeli relations by German Presidents and Chancellors in Israel represent not only self-assurances of Germany’s post-WW

II identity but also serve to externally validate Israel's uncertain collective identity as a secure home for Jewish life after the Holocaust (see Levy 1999: 59-61). This has been recognized and welcomed, in turn, by Israel. For example, in his speech to the Bundestag in 2010, President Peres explicitly took up Horst Köhler's 2005 dictum in the Knesset that the Shoah was part of Germany's identity: "We give you great credit for that" (Peres 2010). In the same speech, Peres emphasized that Israel "will never forget" Angela Merkel's "stirring words of indissoluble support" (Peres 2010) when she pledged that "whoever threatens Israel also threatens us" (Merkel 2009) in her 2009 address to the US Congress.

From Israel's perspective, perhaps the most notable external validation of its identity coming from Germany in recent years have been Angela Merkel's references to Israel as a "Jewish state". Such a reference for the first time appeared in a 2007 party program of Merkel's Christian Democrats (Asseburg and Busse 2011: 702-703) and came up again in the 2009 coalition agreement between the Christian Democrats and the Liberals (CDU/CSU and FDP 2009: 121) as well as in the 2013 coalition agreement between the Christian and Social Democrats (CDU/CSU and SPD 2013: 119). Since the recognition of Israel by other countries as a Jewish state is a longstanding priority for Israeli foreign policy, Germany's affirmation of that objective was received very positively by the Israeli leadership (Dempsey 2010).

More broadly, representatives of both Israel and Germany regularly employ a whole range of bilateral and international arenas to express the special character of their relationship. On the bilateral level, a recurring occasion for such expressions are the regular cabinet-level consultations between the two countries. When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Berlin for the latest of these consultations in February 2016, for example, he as a matter of course and despite the fact that the discussions between the two governments were not free of controversies emphasized the "unique partnership which we have today between our two nations": "When we are in Germany, we know we are among good friends" (Israeli Mission to the European Union 2016). As for international forums, the above quoted speech of German foreign minister Joschka Fischer at the UN General Assembly is a good case in point:

For us, German-Israeli relations will always have a very special character. The State of Israel's right to exist and the security of its citizens will forever remain non-negotiable fixtures of German foreign policy. On that Israel can always rely (UN General Assembly 2005: 18)

Taken as a whole, therefore, symbolic reaffirmations of the 'specialness' of German-Israeli relations in various shapes and forms are ubiquitous in this relationship. Such reaffirmations, in turn, serve as mutual confirmations of Germany's and Israel's self-identities (Berenskoetter 2012a) and help sustain the special relationship between them as a source of ontological security for both Germany and Israel. What is more, mechanisms to maintain the special relations are particularly important for the stability of the relationship at times when its special character appears to be in doubt or is being questioned. In such "critical situations" (Steele 2005: 526), the ontological security needs of the two sides push them to engage in practices to avoid a process of "estrangement" (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010: 424) that would otherwise produce anxiety and undermine their self-identities. It is precisely the threat to Germany's and Israel's ontological security that an existential crisis in their special relationship would entail which triggers mechanisms to protect the relationship from such crises.

Specifically, one important mechanism to this effect consists of Israeli reminders of Germany's moral debt to Israel whenever German representatives appeared to question the 'specialness' of the relationship. Such reminders highlight the dependency of Germany's post-WW II identity on Israel's external validation that Germany lives up to its special historical responsibilities. They work as threats to Germany's identity which help contain dissonance in German-Israeli relations and which put Germany under pressure to remain committed to the special relationship

(Bially-Mattern 2001: 358-362). This pattern is evident, in particular, in Israel's resistance to any German calls for a 'normalization' of the relationship (Gardner Feldman 1999: 340-342). Such calls would be countered by Israeli assertions that its moral claims on Germany were timeless and that forgiveness for the Holocaust was impossible (Gardner Feldman 1984: 44; Lavy 1996: 210). In consequence, this "moral entrapment" (Berenskoetter 2012a) of Germany works to discredit and undermine attempts of German representatives to challenge the 'specialness' of German-Israeli relations. Remarks of a German foreign minister such as those of Walter Scheel to an Israeli newspaper in 1969, that "our relation to Israel resembles our relations to other countries [...] there is nothing special about it" (quoted in Weingardt 2002: 198), while already controversial at the time, would virtually be unthinkable today.

Along similar lines, Israel invokes reminders to Germany's historical guilt and moral duty to counter German behavior which it sees as disregarding the special nature of the relationship. One of the most prominent cases in point is the fall-out between German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin in April 1981 after a number of pro-Palestinian statements of Chancellor Schmidt. In response to these statements, Begin attacked Schmidt for his role in the *Wehrmacht* in World War II and accused him of a cynical attitude towards the crimes committed by Germans in the Holocaust (Wolffsohn and Brechenmacher 2007: 512). More recent examples include the disappointment expressed by Prime Minister Netanyahu with Germany's abstention in a 2012 UN General Assembly vote to grant Palestine non-member observer status at the UN and with German criticisms of Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank as well as the complaints of foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman to his German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier in January 2014 that Germany did not do enough to support Israel in the international arena (De Vita 2015: 836-837). Such Israeli reproaches that Germany fails to live up to its moral responsibilities towards Israel, however, should not be seen as signs of a disintegrating special relationship, but rather contribute to sustaining it in the face of crises. In particular, they link conflicts and policy disagreements in German-Israeli relations to German identity needs and foreground the significance of the relationship for Germany as a source of ontological security. This, in turn, pushes German decision-makers to contain conflicts and disagreements with Israel and to reaffirm their attachment to the special relationship.

A further mechanism that protects German-Israeli relations from internal challenges can be described as the reflexive marginalization of voices in the German discourse which appear to cross the line between criticizing the policies of Israeli governments and negating or at least putting into question Germany's special responsibilities towards Israel. Such voices represent threats to Germany's and Israel's ontological security and therefore provoke rejection and outrage within both Germany and Israel. The two country's ontological security needs therefore interact to constrain the scope for legitimate criticism of Israel and the special relations between Germany and Israel in German political and public discourse. As a case in point, Jürgen W. Möllemann, a former German Vice Chancellor and an influential figure in the German liberal party (FDP) with close ties to Arab business communities, provoked an outcry in the German media and the Bundestag, including accusations of anti-Semitism, when he used anti-Israeli campaign slogans in the 2002 general election campaign which were widely condemned across the German political spectrum, not least by the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Möllemann was forced by the federal leadership of his party to publicly apologize (Berliner Zeitung 2002) and later resigned from his position as leader of the FDP in Germany's biggest state.

A more recent example is the controversial 2012 poem "What must be said" by Günter Grass, a German novelist and Nobel laureate in literature, in which he accuses Israel of endangering world peace and criticizes the "universal silence" over this in German discourse which, Grass argues, is sustained by Germany's perceived moral obligations to Israel. The poem set off an

impassioned debate, but the response in Germany and Israel was overwhelmingly negative (Berenskoetter 2012b). Perhaps the strongest attack on Grass came from a leading conservative broadsheet in Germany which dubbed him “the eternal anti-Semite” (Die Welt 2012a). For the American Jewish committee in Berlin, Grass had done “terrible harm to German-Israeli friendship” (Jones 2012) and Prime Minister Netanyahu called the poem an “absolute scandal” that reveals “a collapse of moral judgment” (Die Welt 2012b).

It should also be noted, however, that this discursive practice of invoking Germany’s historical guilt to marginalize and de-legitimize critics of the special relationship between Germany and Israel feeds into a broader debate about Germany’s culture of remembrance. This debate was sparked, in particular, by Martin Walser’s 1998 acceptance speech of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in Frankfurt, in which he criticized what he claimed was the instrumentalization of the Holocaust as “a means of intimidation or a moral club” (Walser 1998) in the German political debate. While this speech was met with much and often harsh criticism, not least by Ignatz Bubis as President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, it also received significant support in German politics and society (Schirmacher 1999). The extent to which Germany’s moral debt to Israel can or should constrain critics of Israel and German-Israeli relations in German discourse is therefore itself a matter of controversy.

The Meaning of Power and Power Asymmetries in the Special Relationship

In this third part of our case study we explore the effects of asymmetric ontological security needs on the distribution of bargaining power within the German-Israeli relationship. More specifically, we argue that the greater dependency of Germany on the special relationship for its ontological security explains why Israel was time and again able to achieve surprisingly favorable negotiation agreements despite Germany’s superior material power resources.

To begin with, the fact that Israeli decision-makers from the very beginning of the special relationship were well aware of the opportunities opened up by this asymmetry in ontological security needs is evidenced by internal records of the Israeli Foreign Ministry:

We have a somewhat odd relationship with Germany [...] As long as there remains a feeling of guilt inside Germany, this situation can go on without requiring us to offer anything in exchange [for German concessions, K.O.;M.H.]” (Meeting in the Israeli Foreign Ministry 1953, quoted in Jelinek 1997: 246).

Along similar lines, Nahum Goldmann, the President of the World Jewish Congress, commenting on the negotiations about the Luxembourg accord in 1952 that

we are not dealing with a quid pro quo. Nobody is saying to the Germans: You pay us, we forgive you. We are promising nothing; we are offering nothing. We are simply claiming what is ours, morally and legally (in Gardner Feldman 1984: 43).

To be sure, this approach was occasionally criticized in Germany in the early period of the special relationship as an instrumentalization of the past, for example by the Federal Republic’s first ambassador to Israel Rolf Friedemann Pauls (Lavy 1996: 139). In the longer term, however, German decision-makers came to accept Israel’s view that Germany’s immeasurable historical guilt could never be paid off and that its support of Israel was to be permanent and unconditional. Adenauer’s remarks after his visit to Israel in 1966 are exemplary in this regard:

We must never desert this struggling state [...] To those who think that restitution must come to an end and that the German people cannot condemn itself to the slavery of eternal guilt I want to say that one cannot put figures to a moral obligation nor pay it off penny by penny (Adenauer quote in Lavy 141).

What this implies is both a refusal to normalize relations with Israel and the understanding that conventional bargaining is inappropriate for Germany in this relationship. Most notably, negotiation tactics involving threats to withdraw basic material or diplomatic support for Israel would have been at odds with the very core of Germany's foreign policy identity and were therefore always anathema to Adenauer and his successors. In consequence, as the special relationship stabilised over time, material power imbalances and asymmetric policy interdependence in Germany's favour became ever more meaningless.

The corollary of this was an increase in Israel's leverage vis-à-vis Germany. As a case in point, the following analysis of more recent German-Israeli negotiations about the delivery of German Dolphin-class submarines to Israel serves to exemplify that Israeli interlocutors have indeed been able to exploit the ontological security needs of their German partners to make up for their disadvantages in terms of more conventional power indicators and to achieve a highly favourable deal.. Our focus on this series of negotiations between 1999 and 2015 is informed by three considerations. First, the negotiations constitute a critical test for our theoretical argument, first and foremost because of their post-Cold War setting. While competing explanatory approaches would expect Germany to enjoy superior bargaining power in this period, our theoretical perspective to the contrary suggests that Germany's ontological security needs after reunification reinforced the dependency of its foreign policy identity on the special relationship which should have weakened its bargaining position vis-à-vis Israel. Second, the arms deals in question are difficult to reconcile with Germany's political guidelines for arms exports prohibiting the delivery of weapons into conflict areas. They also possibly violate German nonproliferation policy given that a nuclear arming of the submarines after delivery was both likely and unpreventable. Any concession to Israel on this very high-profile issue clearly entailed significant reputational costs for Germany.. That Germany still agreed to a deal that met Israel's key demands must therefore remain puzzling from a utilitarian cost-benefit perspective. Third, the availability of detailed media reports, some of which based on insider knowledge, enable us not only to assess the negotiation outcomes but also to infer initial preferences at the outset of the negotiations. This, in turn, is critical in order to evaluate the extent to which the negotiated agreement reflects the preferred outcome of the two partners.

It was already the Kohl administration which agreed to the Israeli procurement of Dolphin-class submarines and to the considerable financial subsidies by the German state involved. Three submarines were subsequently delivered to Israel in 1999-2000. Criticism at that time was muted, arguably because of the progress made in the Middle East peace process. In the early 2000s, after the second Intifada and with both Israeli and Palestinian governments refusing to enter into new peace talks, further arms deals were more difficult to legitimize. This might explain why the red-green government under Chancellor Schröder waited until November 2005, that is only a couple of days before it left office, to authorize the delivery of the fourth and fifth submarine (Der Spiegel 2005). In 2010, the SPD-CDU grand coalition started negotiations about German financial support for producing a sixth submarine despite widespread frustration with increasing Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the open scepticism, if not, hostility of members of the Israeli leadership to a two-state solution. Under such adverse political circumstances, the Merkel government feared a major domestic controversy if it agreed to a bilateral deal without new reassurances of Israel's commitment to a peaceful conflict resolution. As Israel's ambassador to Berlin between 2008 and 2012, Yoram Ben Zeev, recalled:

The Germans told us: 'We need to get [the deal] through Parliament; give us tools to deal with this' (quoted in Haaretz 2012).

In this context, it was reportedly Chancellor Merkel herself who, encouraged by a similar US position, personally asked Prime Minister Netanyahu to stop new settlement plans, allow the

completion of a sewage treatment plant funded by Germany in the Gaza strip and defreeze Palestinian tax money. Yet, Netanjahu refused to meet the first two demands and only agreed to authorize financial transactions to the Palestinian authorities after the negotiations were in serious deadlock (Der Spiegel 2012: 32-33). While that relatively small concession enabled the German government to save face domestically and to satisfy some critical voices within the coalition parties, it was certainly Israel, not Germany, who had the upper hand in these negotiations.

What is more, a number of public statements of German government officials support the conclusion that Germany gave in to Israeli demands in part with a view to the detrimental effects of a breakdown of the negotiations for Germany's foreign policy identity and its ontological security. For example, German decision-makers consistently deny that they were at any point during the negotiations ready to veto the submarine deal. Moreover, the statements at least implicitly confirm that Germany's responsibility for the special relationship was eventually prioritized over other normative commitments. Thus, government spokesman Steffen Seibert bluntly refused to comment on the compatibility of the deal with German export control guidelines and instead referred to Chancellor Merkel's 2007 UN speech in which she had defined responsibility for Israel's existence as part of the Federal Republic's *raison d'état*. The delivery of submarines, Seibert explained, was a manifestation of that unique responsibility for Israel (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2012). Along similar lines, a high-ranking former military has anonymously confirmed that „Whenever it comes to Israel, things run differently“ (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2012).

More explicitly, Israel's chief negotiator Ben Zeev acknowledged the impact of non-negotiable moral commitments for the bargaining outcome:

In the end, responsibility for Israel's security is a policy principle in Germany and personal principle with Merkel [...] With her, this overrides politics, personal tensions and any other consideration (Haaretz 2012).

Asked why Germany agreed to delivering four battle ships in addition to the sixth dolphine submarine, Merkel herself in 2015 confirmed the exceptional status of German-Israeli relations, saying that she believed in the need to provide particular support to Israel against the backdrop of the Holocaust (Die Welt 2015).

What is clear from these statements is that the bargaining hand of the German government was not at all strengthened by its arguably small domestic win-set as a two-level game perspective might have expected. Nor did its negotiation position reflect Germany's advantages in material power resources. A more plausible explanation for the fact that Germany was only able to get one minor concession from Israel during the negotiations derives from the observation that Germany's ontological security is indissolubly tied to the special relationship with Israel and that German decision-makers were therefore unwilling to engage in conventional bargaining and to risk a breakdown of the negotiations. Starting out from asymmetries in the ontological security needs of partners to special relationships thus offers a unique theoretical perspective on power relations and negotiation dynamics within such relationships.

Conclusion

The German-Israeli reconciliation after the Holocaust and the special relationship between the two countries that has since developed stand out among the most remarkable and unlikely achievements in post-World War II international politics. This achievement must remain puzzling from established realist, liberal and constructivist perspectives. It is the main contention of this paper that the blind spots in these accounts of German-Israeli relations can

be usefully addressed through the lens of ontological security. Specifically, the special relationship has been formative for Germany's and Israel's identity and is an important source of ontological security for both countries, but above all for Germany. Putting the ontological security which the relationship provides for the two partners centre stage sheds new light on the establishment and stability of the special relations as well as on how they are being maintained and on how negotiations between Germany and Israel play out. The ontological security perspective also serves to emphasize how much Germany, in particular, has benefitted from the special relationship and how critical it is for its self-identity and international reputation. This helps explain why post-unification Germany remains fundamentally attached to the special relationship and willing to sign up to what in a narrow material sense appear to be uneven bargains in favour of Israel. The expectation, therefore, is that the German-Israeli relationship will continue to buck trends towards a 'normalisation' of German foreign policy which have been described, for example, with regard to Germany's approach to international military missions and its European policy (McAdams 1997; Karp 2009; Oppermann 2012).

Above and beyond the case of German-Israeli relations, the broader claim of this paper is that the concept of ontological security promises to address limitations of existing scholarship on special relationships more generally. This is the case in particular regarding the motivations of states to establish and uphold special relations, their stability and durability, the politics and mechanisms of sustaining special relationships and the power relations within such relations. It would be for further studies to explore to what extent and under what conditions that promise holds. Prya Chacko's study (2014) of the development of US-Indian cooperation indicates that ontological security seeking indeed motivated the establishment of a special relationship in another case. Similar in-depth case studies could be done on a range of bilateral relationships, such as, for example, the relations between Germany and France or Poland or between the United States and Canada (see above). Scholars might also explore the question to what extent the erosion of special relationships can be explained as a result of changing ontological security needs as our analysis implies. In the long run, however, what is needed are comparative research designs in order to systematically demonstrate the plausibility of our claims across different cases and contexts. This would support the notion of a unique ontological security perspective both on special relationships and the interaction level of international relations more broadly.

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