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Germany needs to step up on Israel-Palestine

The war between Israel and Hamas has been raging for two months. Germany should do more to promote a peaceful solution to the conflict

After seven weeks of war between Israel and Hamas, hard diplomatic efforts led to a temporary cease-fire that took effect on 24 November, allowing for the release of some hostages from Gaza and some Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails, as well as an increase in humanitarian aid to Gaza. Fighting resumed on 1 December, with both sides blaming the other for the resumption of hostilities, and has not let up since. The Israeli government has made it clear that its forces will continue the campaign in Gaza and that there is little interest in a more durable cease-fire, while Hamas has rejected multiple options for temporary and permanent cease-fires.

The seven-day cease-fire, however, proves that diplomacy can be effective. It only came about after difficult negotiations between Israel and Hamas and mediation by Qatar, with support from the United States. Since the cease-fire, Washington has begun to message publicly that it expects greater precision, i.e., fewer civilian casualties, from the Israeli government's bombing of the southern Gaza Strip, which offers an opening for other countries to communicate similar expectations — and go further. Israel has not responded to these concerns, instead largely dismissing them. More countries should call publicly for a cease-fire and should begin to work toward a more durable solution to the conflict.

Germany has a particular role to play here. Since World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, German social democracy has traditionally stood up for both Israel's right to exist and the Palestinians' right to self-determination. The centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) — one of Germany's two main parties and the current leading party of the federal government — has always put a political solution to the Middle East conflict at the heart of its international policy: peace in the Middle East was the goal. This is why the SPD has spoken out against both terrorist violence and Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and has

called for compliance with international law on both sides of the conflict.

A German social democratic approach

More than 23 000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces so far, according to the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza; women and children make up about 70 per cent of the death toll. In the meantime, the majority of the Gaza Strip has become unlivable. Some 85 per cent of Gaza's population, around 1.9 million people, has been internally displaced since the beginning of the conflict, and 70 per cent of homes in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed. Conditions in the Gaza Strip are inhumane and brutal: a recent UN report classified the entire population of the strip as experiencing acute food insecurity, with half of the population at risk of starvation. In the United States, the willingness to accept civilian death and suffering in Gaza as collateral damage in the war against Hamas is dwindling, both politically and socially. There is open political discussion about attaching conditionalities to the US government's massive financial and military support for Israel.

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The SPD has always adopted a two-pronged approach, which aimed to take Germany's core national interests in the region into account on two levels: the establishment of responsible relations with Israel and the maintenance of durable relations with Arab states, avoiding unilateral partisanship. This policy is particularly associated with the politician Hans-Jürgen Wischnewski.

In the 1970s, then-West Germany, alongside Israel, was directly threatened by Palestinian terrorism; consider the deadly attack on the Israeli Olympic team at the 1972 Munich Games or the 1977 hijacking of a German airliner. Nevertheless, the social democratic leadership spoke out in favour of recognising the PLO, which had been branded a terrorist organisation, as a political force in order to facilitate negotiations and a peaceful solution to the conflict. Symbolically, Chancellor Willy Brandt deliberately invited the PLO to join the Socialist International at the end of the 1970s, and met with Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO, in Vienna in July 1979. The meeting was historically significant for international recognition of the PLO, with both Germany and Austria agreeing to maintain contact with the PLO after that meeting. German social democracy was able to reconcile the deeply divergent interests of the two parties in the conflict into a coherent peace policy for the Middle East, with the right to self-determination of both peoples – Israelis and Palestinians – at its core.

Renewing a commitment

Today's SPD should return to a policy that focuses on a political solution to the Middle East conflict. Social democracy stands for political responsibility and for solidarity with the State of Israel. That said, it should be noted that the declaration that Israel's security is the '*raison d'état* of the Federal Republic of Germany' is a formulation that historically does not represent a social democratic position but rather a position taken by Angela Merkel. In 2007, in a speech at the UN, Merkel first declared that Israel's security was Germany's *raison d'être* — a positioning she repeated during a 2008 speech to the Knesset. This positioning complicates, rather than promotes, a political solution. Germany cannot guarantee Israel's security — nor does Israel desire this guarantee from Germany. With this stance, Germany is embedding itself in the conflict and consequently cannot be part of the solution. This stance ultimately risks undermining both the role of international law as a whole and Germany's own credibility, both of which are key German interests.

Germany needs a renewed commitment to the idea that security can only be achieved in the long term through a political balance with the legitimate interests of the Palestinian people. Should a two-state solution remain unattainable in the long term, this would have serious consequences — not only for Palestinians but also for Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state.

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Out of solidarity with the Jewish people, but also out of national self-interest, Germany should actively participate in a political solution to the conflict. The credibility of Germany as an active foreign policy actor in a multipolar world rests on advocating credibly for peace, freedom and justice for both Israelis and Palestinians. The SPD should stand up for this.

Specifically, the SPD, as Germany's ruling party, should demand a return to a humanitarian cease-fire, with the ultimate aim of a permanent cease-fire and cessation of hostilities, criticise the violations of international law and the disproportionate actions of the Israeli army, campaign for a halt to Israel's aggressive settlement policy in the West Bank, and ensure that German aid for the formation of Palestinian state structures in the West Bank is sustained and that critical Israeli civil society is also supported. As a European party, we should also advocate a coordinated approach to the Middle East conflict with other European partners. So far, the EU has been ineffective due to internal divisions; Germany should take the lead

in making the EU a relevant actor in resolving the conflict using its political and financial leverage in the bloc. Germany, and in particular Olaf Scholz, should not hide behind the American administration, but should define its own position in the conflict, reflecting its own interests, and push the US to use its political and military leverage to end the hostilities.

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