

World War II and the Holocaust: An Unspeakable Truth, Israel's Vested Interest in Fueling German Guilt

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Normalization is a word commonly used in the context of current Israeli-German relations. Its meaning: not quite forgiving, nor forgetting, but moving on. Yet while its users support their claim by pointing at the hordes of Israelis moving to Berlin and the young Germans discovering Tel Aviv's night life, the underlining truth is different. The so-called normalization would never spread from the streets and beach bars to the diplomatic level, by Israel's own design.

The spokeswoman of the Israeli embassy in Berlin met a few months ago with a group of Israeli reporters. What was said in the room only they know, but according to Haaretz, she openly admitted that it's in Israel's interest to maintain German guilt about the Holocaust. Seeking full normalization of relations is not a goal, she allegedly stated during the closed briefing.



Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu with German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Holocaust Museum in Berlin 18 Jan 2010 (Israel Government Press Office/Moshe Milner)

Both the spokeswoman and the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Jerusalem claimed the statements were inaccurate and taken out of context, but regardless, it's hard to argue with their content.

Suggesting that Israel benefits from German guilt is, in many ways, stating the obvious.

Guilt is the reason Germany is building submarines for Israel and selling them far below cost, guilt is the reason Berlin often avoids criticizing Israel even when its European partners strongly condemn the Jewish state, and guilt was the reason chancellor Angela Merkel unprecedentedly defined Israel's security as part of Germany's *raison d'état*. So why would Israel want to dry up the well from which it drinks?

This policy may not be officially dictated to Berlin's Israeli embassy from Jerusalem, but in this regard, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is already leading by example. His routine comparison between Nazi Germany and Iran, Hamas, and most recently the BDS movement, are designed to do just that – address the guilty conscience of the international community, and especially its leaders.

His insistence on reusing this metaphor time and again is only proof of its effectiveness, as opposed to the nuclear duck metaphor, for example, which was mentioned only once. There's no reason to change a broken record if it still plays. The collective Israeli memory of the Holocaust may prefer to emphasize the manifestations of Jewish heroism during the Third Reich, but politically, playing the victim serves Israel much better.

Especially at a time when Europe is turning increasingly against Israel, when leading European states like France and Sweden are championing the Palestinian statehood bid, and in Hungary and Greece anti-Semitism raises its ugly head, Israel needs to hold on to every friend it has – and there's no stronger glue than guilt.

But the use of remorse as a political tool must remain unspoken. The editorials criticizing Netanyahu after every Nazi comparison aren't motivated strictly by the boredom of journalists. The blatantly cynical use of the Holocaust memory doesn't sit well with the victim persona Israel is interested in projecting. Therefore, it must remain a state secret: an open admission of Israel's undiplomatic fondness of its allies' sore spots is a sure fire way of drying up that well.

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