

Written interview with the Federal President of Germany by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, published on 30 June, the first day of the President's visit to the State of Israel.

The questions are asked by Jonathan Lis, a diplomatic correspondent at Haaretz.

- 1. You are considered a great friend of Israel. Germany expresses constant support for Israel's right to defend itself. The chief prosecutor of the International [Criminal] Court of Justice in The Hague recently announced the opening of an investigation of suspicions of war crimes allegedly committed by Israel in the West Bank and Gaza. How do you view this development? Is it a legitimate and proper procedure of the international community to reveal the truth or is it a political move designed to serve the Palestinian narrative?**

I know what a sensitive issue this is in Israel, so please allow me a general observation before I answer your specific question. Germany lives with the historical legacy of the monstrous abuses of political power perpetrated by the Nazi regime. Accordingly, the establishment of an international order such as that embodied by the United Nations and the International Criminal Court is something we are fundamentally in favour of. Our own experience shows that power must be kept in check by the law. For its part, Israel has repeatedly experienced discrimination and pressure in its dealings with the United Nations and associated organisations, giving it a much more sceptical perspective. It has much greater confidence in itself than in international organisations.

As to your concrete question regarding the opening of investigations: the German government's position is that the International Criminal Court has no jurisdiction in this matter due to the absence of Palestinian statehood. A Palestinian state and the determination of territorial borders can only be

achieved through direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. Germany nevertheless respects the independence of the International Criminal Court and its prosecuting authority. It is up to the new chief prosecutor Karim Khan to decide how the investigations should proceed in line with the legal framework that governs his mandate.

- 2. Serving as Germany's foreign minister, you played a key role in advancing the nuclear deal with Iran. In recent days, a new extremist Iranian president has been elected, and the regime has not signaled its willingness to withdraw from its nuclear weapons program. Israel expresses strong opposition to a return to an agreement with Iran. In retrospect, and given the fact that Iran has not withdrawn from its plans, was the concern in Israel justified? Should the U.S. re-join the agreement?**

Israel's concerns about the threat posed by an Iran aspiring to nuclear arms are of course justified. I have been constantly aware of these concerns throughout many years of difficult negotiations with Iran. And I have had numerous discussions with Israel on this issue, most recently with President Rivlin and Israel's Chief of the General Staff in Berlin a few weeks ago. When it comes to Iran, Germany and Israel share a common strategic goal: Iran must not acquire nuclear weapons. We also want to restrict Iran's missile programme and its destabilising activities in the region. We may not always agree on the best way to achieve this. However, we believe that renewing the JCPOA is the most effective way to demonstrably and verifiably prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear bomb. Intensive and highly complex negotiations to this end involving the new US administration are currently under way. I hope they are successful, for Germany's and Israel's sake.

- 3. During the confrontation with Hamas, last May, pro-Palestinian demonstrations took place throughout Germany, mainly by Muslim immigrants, during which synagogues were attacked and Israeli flags were burned. In your opinion, will Muslim immigration incite hatred of Israel and influence public opinion in Germany? What should the government do about it?**

These antisemitic attacks were abhorrent, and my reaction to them is unequivocal: antisemitism – whoever the perpetrators – will not be tolerated in our country. Nothing justifies the intimidation of Jews in Germany, or attacks on synagogues in German cities. The right to freedom of expression and the right to protest are enshrined in our Constitution. Nevertheless, anyone who takes to the streets to burn flags bearing the Star of David and yell antisemitic slogans is not just abusing their right to protest, but committing criminal offences that must be prosecuted.

The overwhelming majority of Muslims in Germany want to live in peace and security – a desire they share with most other people in the country. However, we will combat extremist groups with the full force of the rule of law. In areas where current legislation is not yet effective, revisions have been set in motion. For example, the government parties have proposed an amendment to the penal code according to which the flag of the Palestinian group Hamas is to be banned in Germany in future. Furthermore, it will become possible to criminalise the dissemination of propaganda and the use of symbols representing terrorist organisations listed in the EU's terrorism blacklist, which includes Hamas.

- 4. The Alternative for Germany party (“Alternative für Deutschland, AfD”) got strengthened in recent years and its extremist point of view is supported by large groups. Are you concerned about antisemitism rising in Germany? What are the authorities doing to reduce this phenomenon?**

Yes, this is something that concerns me. In the year 2020, over 2,300 antisemitic offences were recorded – a 15-percent increase over the previous year. In the wake of the appalling attack on the synagogue in Halle, police protection for Jewish institutions was reinforced yet again. That said, antisemitic hate speech and assaults in everyday life also merit our full attention. This is why the Federal Minister of the Interior and his counterparts in the Länder want tighter penal provisions for antisemitic offences. It must be possible to prohibit anti-Israel rallies outside synagogues. There is also a need for closer examination of the motives behind perpetrators’ actions. This allows more effective prevention, something that both the interior ministers and the Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism have campaigned for. For my part, I will not relent in my efforts to remind the competent government authorities of their responsibilities. At the same time, I applaud every citizen who takes a stand against antisemitism and inhumane behaviour. Wherever the Jewish community is under threat, we must stand resolutely at its side.

- 5. You are visiting Israel to honor President Rivlin at the end of his term. The close and personal relationship between you stood out over the years. Can you share a memory from your encounters with Rivlin that express the connection between you?**

Friendship grows over the years and over the course of numerous encounters.

But I will always remember my first meeting with President Rivlin. It was in

May 2017, on my first visit to Israel as Federal President of Germany. We met in the evening, in the bustling Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem. He was accompanied by his wife Nechama, and I by mine, Elke. We talked about football and life, and left politics for the following day. Equally, I will never forget Ruvy Rivlin's invitation to become the first Federal President of Germany to give a speech at Yad Vashem, in January 2020. For me, this tremendous gesture was an expression of his trust not just in me, but in my country. On that day in January 2020, this trust felt like both a gift and a burden to me. We then commemorated the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz together, visiting Jerusalem, Auschwitz and Berlin in the space of a few days. This is what profoundly unites the two of us politically: our commitment to active and fruitful remembrance as an inspiration for a better future.

6. Your visit is taking place weeks after a new government has been formed in Israel. Do you expect the new government to promote a peace initiative with the Palestinian Authority?

My visit had already been planned long ago, and had to be postponed several times due to the pandemic. Now it coincides with the beginning of a new political chapter for Israel. I am very much looking forward to gaining a first impression of the new political situation in Israel. When I meet with Prime Minister Bennett and Foreign Minister Lapid, aside from German-Israeli issues we will of course also discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The dramatic escalation of violence in May has no doubt made it painfully clear to all concerned that this conflict is not going to disappear, and cannot be ignored. And although this observation is by no means a new one: there can be no

bright future without a political solution. The German government continues to regard a negotiated two-state-solution as the most promising route to a peaceful future. But for the moment I believe it is important to build trust between the new Israeli leadership and the Palestinian side. The resumption of direct dialogue on the big questions is a goal that can only be reached by small steps and concrete collaboration.