

LIKE A MIRACLE OF HISTORY

Norbert Lammert



Prof. Dr. Norbert Lammert is President of the German Bundestag.

"But we remember the past not in order to brood upon it, but in order that it shall never recur." When Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion uttered this memorable sentence in March 1960 at a press conference after his historic meeting with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in the New York Waldorf Astoria hotel, Germany and Israel had not yet established diplomatic relations. During the years following the unconditional capitulation of the National Socialist regime, which had killed millions of European Jews, Jews in Israel and elsewhere could not conceive of the possibility of trust ever being established between Germans and Israelis. And without the leadership demonstrated by Adenauer and Ben-Gurion, a rapprochement, which would subsequently facilitate increasingly close cooperation and ultimately friendship between our countries, would not have been possible at this early stage. By sheer good fortune in two aspects, these two great old men were the first heads of government immediately after the two countries had been founded – Israel in 1948 on the ashes of the Holocaust and the Federal Republic in 1949 on the ruins of the Nazi regime – and found the insight and determination to aim for a genuine fresh start.

It took several years from the conclusion of the reparations agreement signed in 1952 in Luxembourg City Hall, which was important for the process of rapprochement between Germans and Jews, until the two states established diplomatic relations. When the Federal Republic and Israel conducted an official exchange of ambassadors 50 years ago on 12 May 1965, this was anything but a foregone conclusion; it still seems almost like a miracle of history today. It had only been 20 years since the demise of the National Socialist terror regime, which had put the annihilation of Jewish life in Germany and Europe on the political agenda – a chapter of our history that will forever remain a determining element of our relationship with Israel.

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In 2005, the Holocaust Memorial was inaugurated in Berlin. The debates in the Bundestag which had preceded its construction are characteristic of a dynamic engagement with the nation's past. | Source: Toby Keller, flickr ©①③③.

However, German-Israeli relations must and should not be limited exclusively to our traumatic past. There are a number of good reasons why we should turn our thoughts to the present and the future. Since diplomatic relations were established 50 years ago, close and intensive cooperation has developed between the two countries. There is a lively, mutually enriching cultural exchange, intensive, constantly expanding trade relations as well as numerous cooperation projects between universities and research institutions. At a communal level, over one hundred town twinnings have been established so far. Since 2008, the German and Israeli cabinets have conducted annual governmental consultations, which are giving further important impulses to the bilateral relations between our countries. It is still obvious, however, that the German-Israeli relationship is not "normal", and nor should it be. Germany has a special historical responsibility for Israel's existence and security, underscored emphatically by Chancellor Angela Merkel in her eminent and much-quoted speech at the Israeli Knesset in March 2008. It remains both our duty and our

responsibility to energetically confront those who question Israel's right to exist and to ensure that the citizens of the State of Israel have the same right as those in the neighbouring countries to live within internationally recognised borders – free from fear, terror and violence.

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Of course, one should also be permitted to raise the question of Israel's responsibility for the current conditions in the Palestinian territories in this context. Voicing criticism is legitimate, sometimes even essential, also and particularly among friends. But we must not condone people being harassed, threatened or attacked in Germany today because they speak up for Israel or reveal their Jewish identity. We are thankful that it has been possible for Jewish life to flourish once again in Germany after the traumatic experiences of the National Socialist dictatorship and the Holocaust. This is to us, the second German democracy, not only one of the best compliments but also a moving expression of trust. The fact that we still have to protect Jewish institutions in Germany against attacks and that anti-Semitism can still be encountered in our country is shameful. We are aware that anti-Semitism is not a problem that is restricted to Germany. But we also know that nowhere else in the world has it resulted in such devastating consequences like here. Therefore, the German state, the authorities and the citizens have a particular responsibility to deny anti-Semitism social acceptance.

In this regard, the German parliament plays a central role. Besides numerous intensive debates in the Bundestag, as in 1999 over erecting the Holocaust Memorial, which was opened to the public exactly ten years ago, an annual event has been held in the plenary since 1996 on the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism. The fact that Shimon Peres was the third Israeli President to speak at the Bundestag on this occasion in 2010 is yet another indication of our special relationship with Israel. It is a relationship to which all Presidents of the Bundestag have attached and continue to attach particular importance, each in his or her own way. In addition, thanks to the committed work of the German-Israeli Parliamentary Group, established as far back as 1971 to foster friendly relations with Israel, close and trusting relations exist between the Israeli Knesset and the German Bundestag today. These manifest in measures such as

regular exchange visits, participation in the International Parliamentary Scholarship program (IPS) and in the regular exchange of personnel.



Shimon Peres spoke in 2010 as the third Israeli President in the Bundestag – a sign of the special relationship the Federal Republic shares with the State of Israel. | Source: Amos Ben Gershom GPO, Israelisches Außenministerium, flickr ©🇮🇱🇩🇪

The Bundestag will mark this year's special anniversary by placing the relationship with Israel center stage and organising a number of activities and events. There are plans for the presidia of the two parliaments to meet in Israel and Germany. During the course of the year, we will also exhibit works of art by young Israeli artists, which the Advisory Committee for Art of the Bundestag purchased for its art collection on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. There are further plans to exhibit part of a collection of manuscripts of Albert Einstein focusing on his political activities, which has been assembled by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A further exhibition designed by the German-Israeli Association will reflect the historical development of the unique relationship between Germany and Israel.

The fact that 70 years on from the liberation of the concentration and extermination camp of Auschwitz and the end of World War II – a war that was probably the greatest catastrophe of human

history, certainly of German history – we can look back on many years of enduring friendship with Israel as a godsend. At the same time, this friendship, which we shall strive to strengthen and develop in our role as a reliable, yet not uncritical partner, will remain an ongoing task, which we are very proud of pursuing particularly during this very special year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Norbert Lammert', written in a cursive style.

Prof. Dr. Norbert Lammert
President of the German Bundestag