

## **Germans and Jews – United by their past and divided by their present?**

A survey by the Bertelsmann Foundation on the view of Germany held by Jews in Israel and the USA, and the view of Israel from Germany

What do Jews in Israel and the USA think of Germany and the Germans? What do the Germans think of Israel and the Jews? What role does the past play, and how are present-day political problems perceived and assessed? A new study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung investigates these issues<sup>1</sup>.

Its findings paint a contradictory picture. The past unites them whilst the present divides. The Germans accept their history; their main response is a feeling of shame which deepens as time passes, but no guilt. Even though 45% of Germans believe that guilt applies only to those directly involved in the persecution of the Jews, most Germans nowadays feel a sense of shame that “Germans have committed so many crimes against the Jewish people”. Independently of gender, age or education, some two thirds of all respondents in Germany gave their ready assent to this statement. This shows a slight increase in this group of respondents since the 1991 comparable survey (from 60% to 66%). The memory of the national socialist mass murder of the Jews forms a constitutive element of present-day political culture in Germany.

This fact is recognised by the majority of Jews in Israel who are embracing an increasingly positive image of Germany and the Germans. 57% of Israelis and 70% of Jews living in the USA have an opinion of present-day Germany that ranges from excellent to fairly good. This marks a clear improvement in the attitude of Israelis to Germany since 1991. Germany is acknowledged as a democracy with solid foundations. Israelis are now much more optimistic in their assessment of the situation in Germany in 2007 than they were in late 1991 in the wake of German reunification.

German foreign policy in the Middle East is also viewed on balance by the Israelis as being markedly more pro-Israel than that of other major west European powers. A relative majority of 42% of Israelis consider German foreign policy to be more pro-Israel whilst a mere 11% believe it is more anti-Israel than that of other European countries.

The dramatically changed image of Germany in Israel is also reflected in attitudes to the deployment of the Bundeswehr (Federal Armed Forces) on the coast of Lebanon. In the wake of the war in Lebanon last year, in October the federal government sent German marine units to monitor the coastline as part of the UNIFIL peace mission to Lebanon. Three quarters of the Jews surveyed in Israel welcomed the current deployment of Bundeswehr forces in Lebanon. Only one in five were opposed to the deployment of the Bundeswehr to secure the peace in Lebanon. This clearly shows that two images of Germany exist side by side in Israel – an image of the past and an image of present-day Germany as it really is.

In Germany on the other hand assent to the peace mission of German marine units along the Lebanese coast is more muted: Proponents (49%) and opponents (47%) of

the Lebanese deployment are more or less equally divided. Most likely, this is also a reflection of a wide-spread scepticism to the deployment of any form of military forces. Furthermore, Germany's military engagement in Lebanon is generally seen as a move to protect Israel, although 58% of Germans adopt a neutral stance to the Middle East conflict between Israelis and Arabs.

In terms of the concrete evaluation of current policies – especially those referring to the Middle East conflict and the strategic, geopolitical issues associated with it - there is a wide divergence of opinion between Germans on the one hand and Jews in Israel and the USA on the other. In its most extreme form this is apparent when it comes to the issue of the use of force in conflict situations in general and in the Middle East in particular.

Whilst over four fifths of Israelis and American Jews believe that in the international arena there are situations in which the use of force is necessary, not even two fifths of respondents in Germany subscribe to such a view. On the contrary, the majority of Germans (58%) believe that in general there is no such necessity that can justify the use of military force.

Such a widening divergence in perceptions of basic political issues has its roots in the different lessons that have been learnt from the past (in Germany “never again war”, on the Jewish side “never again victims”), and for the Israelis in the completely different reality of the situation they are confronted with in the Middle East.

Historical and contemporary differences give rise to disparate conclusions on crucial political problems. This leads to tensions between Germans and Jews which are particularly evident in terms of current developments in the Middle East. The repeated anti-Israel proclamations of the Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, in which he calls, among other things, for the elimination of the state of Israel, have led three quarters of the Israelis surveyed to believe that the Iranian atomic programme poses a tangible threat to the existence of Israel. A similar number of American Jews also subscribe to this view. Although the number of Germans sharing this view is smaller, here too the Iranian atomic programme does indeed constitute a lethal threat to the existence of Israel for a substantial majority (62%) of those surveyed.

Yet whilst there is a broad consensus among Jews and Germans as to the critical nature of the threat to Israel posed by the Iranian atomic programme, opinions between Germans and Israelis and Jews in the USA diverge when it comes to the question of a military strike against Iran. Whilst four fifths of Israelis and nearly three quarters of American Jews would view a military strike against Iran as being justified if Iran builds an atomic bomb despite negotiations, a majority in Germany of 61% would be opposed to such military action. This finding is a faithful reflection of the attitudes held by Germans, Israelis and American Jews to the use of military force in general.

It is against this background that the amount of sympathy accorded international politicians in Israel should be read. Of the 4 heads of state and government that respondents were asked to evaluate, it was those who have held office for some time, like US President George W. Bush, the French President Jacques Chirac and the Russian President Vladimir Putin, with which the overwhelming majority of respondents were most familiar. By way of comparison, a mere 58% of Israelis

surveyed knew the name of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel who has only been in office for little over a year. On the other hands most of those acquainted with her gave her on balance a positive rating: 35% found that she was “highly sympathetic” or “sympathetic” whilst 16% found her to be “highly unsympathetic” or “unsympathetic”. US President George W. Bush fared much better in the popularity rating with 68% of Israelis finding him “sympathetic”. By way of comparison, Russian President Putin cut a very poor figure with a mere 15% of Israeli respondents finding him “sympathetic”. The worst rating was giving to French President Chirac, with a mere 12% of respondents finding him “sympathetic”.

The findings of the survey allow us to draw the following conclusions:

1. Relationships between Germans and Jews are now on a more solid footing. The sceptical attitudes associated with German reunification have given way to confidence in the stability of the democratic system and in the positions adopted by Germany with respect to Israel.
2. In this context it is paramount for ensuring the consolidation of German-Israeli relationships to identify common interests that go over and beyond historical memory and that can build viable foundations for the future. This includes building strategic partnerships in the realms of foreign policy and security policy as well as in economic relations. Germany can indeed assume a constructive role in securing peace in the Middle East.
3. Political education in Germany should not be limited to “coming to terms with the past” through keeping alive historical memory, but must also play an active part in promoting a mutual understanding of the different existential situations faced by Germany and Israel. To this end it is especially important to bring the young generations of the two countries into intensive dialogue with one another.

<sup>1</sup> In late 1991 TNS Emnid was commissioned by the current affairs magazine “Der Spiegel” to carry out a comparative analysis of attitudes and sensitivities among Germans and Israelis. Many of the questions in this survey were replicated to enable a comparison of trends which were incorporated into the final assessment.

The survey was carried out in the three target countries by telephone using CATI technology (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing)

Country	Sampled Population	No. of Respondents	Survey Time
Germany	German-speaking population	1,004	23-24 Jan. 07
Israel	Jewish population	1,015	21-25 Jan. 07
USA	Jewish population	500	23-26 Jan. 07

In Israel the survey was conducted by TNS Telesker in Ramat Gan, Israel. In the USA it was carried out by the market and public opinion research institute Leger Marketing, Philadelphia. All institutes involved in conducting the survey are members of the Gallup International Association and have a wealth of experience in the design of international surveys.

Editor:                   Stephan Vopel

Project Director, German-Jewish Dialogue  
Bertelsmann Stiftung  
Carl-Bertelsmann Strasse 256  
33311 Gütersloh  
Germany

Tel.: +49 (0) 5241 81-81 397

Mobile: 0173 545 20 64

[stephan.vopel@bertelsmann.de](mailto:stephan.vopel@bertelsmann.de)