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Merz in Israel. (Un)conditional support?

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In the first week of December, Chancellor Friedrich Merz undertook a two-day visit to Jordan and Israel – his first since assuming office. In Jordan, he met King Abdullah II, to whom he expressed support for a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and emphasised the need to increase humanitarian aid for Gaza. He then travelled to Israel, where he held talks with the state authorities and the leader of the opposition. During a press conference with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he underscored Germany's commitment to defending Israel's security and right to exist. He also stressed the need to uphold international law and protect the civilian population in Gaza, which was the subject of his telephone conversation with the President of the Palestinian National Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, held prior to his meeting with Netanyahu. Concurrently with Merz's visit to Israel, Germany received the first battery of the Israeli Arrow 3 missile defence system and announced its initial operational readiness; the system constitutes the largest export contract in the history of Israel's defence industry and represents one of the pillars of Germany's air defence strategy.

Merz's visit reaffirmed the continuity of the special partnership between the two countries, while simultaneously revealing a shift in emphasis: support for Israel is to become more conditional, more firmly grounded in humanitarian law, and more attentive to the ongoing debate in Germany concerning the scope and nature of solidarity with that state. In this context, Berlin seeks to reconcile its policy of supporting Israel – as part of Germany's 'raison d'état' and its self-perception as a leading partner within the EU – with its ambition to serve as one of the key European intermediaries in the peace process.

Commentary

- **Although Berlin views its relations with Israel as exceptional, it seeks to move away from a policy of unconditional support.** Merz reiterated Germany's formula of 'enduring responsibility' for Israel's security, yet spoke explicitly of the dilemma that Israel's war in Gaza poses for Berlin: the need to reconcile its commitments to Israel with its obligations under international law. The decision in August to suspend exports of armaments that could be used in Gaza – the first such measure in the history of reunified Germany – represented a practical manifestation of this dilemma. The resumption of deliveries following a ceasefire is intended to demonstrate that German political and military support is conditional upon compliance with humanitarian law. This approach also carries a domestic dimension, as it allows the government to show that it is responding to the increasingly critical debate within Germany concerning the limits of support for Israel and to accusations of complicity in breaches of international law. According to

surveys conducted by the Körber Foundation, only 15% of Germans support the continuation of arms deliveries, 73% favour increased diplomatic pressure, and 60% reject the notion of a special responsibility for Israel's security.

- **The policy of importing arms from Israel and exporting them to that country is to remain selective and governed by legal and symbolic oversight.** From Berlin's perspective, maintaining strategic projects such as the acquisition of three Arrow 3 missile defence system batteries is crucial. At the same time, in assessing export licences, the Merz government is adhering to a 'case by case' principle – meaning that components and technologies relevant to long-term defence cooperation may be supplied, whereas armaments and military equipment directly used in Gaza are subject to stricter restrictions. This selectivity is intended to reduce legal and political risks while enabling Germany to maintain its position as Israel's second-largest supplier of arms and military equipment after the United States. Merz also avoided giving a clear answer to journalists' questions regarding a possible visit by Netanyahu to Germany. At the beginning of the year, the chancellor had expressed his readiness to receive him despite the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court.
- **Merz is seeking to strengthen Germany's position as a mediator in the Middle East conflict, although the Federal Republic's actual capacity for action remains limited.** In Jordan and Israel, the chancellor consistently reiterated support for a two-state solution and for the US plan envisaging the deployment of international stabilisation forces to Gaza. In October, the German Federal Foreign Office stated that since October 2023 Germany had provided more than €375 million in aid to the Palestinian territories, and it has now revealed plans to co-host, together with Egypt, a donors' conference for the reconstruction of Gaza. At the same time, Germany is limiting its military contribution to the deployment of three Bundeswehr officers and three diplomats to the US Civil-Military Coordination Centre in southern Israel. Despite the decisions by France and the United Kingdom to recognise the State of Palestine, Berlin maintains the position that such a step should occur only at the conclusion of the peace process, a stance that effectively aligns with Israel's policy.