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Merkel: Germany agrees with Israel that Iran must never obtain nukes

German chancellor wraps up working visit to Israel, says two nations agree on goal but disagree about how best to achieve it • Merkel agrees to prod PA President Mahmoud Abbas on peace process, says Palestinians must recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem, Thursday | Photo: Noam Revkin-Fenton

Germany is very convinced and "strongly shares Israel's position that everything must be done to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Where we are not always united is on the path to this goal," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said this week during a two-day visit to Israel.

Merkel added that Iran's military presence in Syria and Lebanon was a threat to Israel.

Merkel was in Israel for two days of joint government consultations, the seventh such trip since Israel and Germany established the tradition a decade ago.

She and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared together at a press conference where they downplayed their differences. Netanyahu welcomed European efforts to address Iranian "aggression" in Europe, and Merkel agreed to prod Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on the stalled peace talks.

"We agree on most things, and we disagree on something. So what?" Netanyahu said. "We have a very strong alliance."

Despite gingerly addressing the gaps, the sides remain strongly divided over Europe's support for the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

Netanyahu says the deal, which curbed Iran's nuclear program, does not include enough safeguards to prevent the Islamic Republic from developing a nuclear weapons capability. Netanyahu lauded U.S. President Donald Trump for pulling out of the deal this year, which Merkel and other world leaders helped negotiate.

Israel has also criticized Europe for moving forward on the Iran deal even as Iran has been accused of terror plots in Europe.

Merkel, whose rapport with Netanyahu has been cool at times, maintains that Israel will be best served by keeping the Iranian nuclear deal intact, contradicting Netanyahu's demand that it be scrapped and stiff sanctions imposed instead.

She earlier downplayed differences on Iran, saying the sides were "absolutely in agreement" on preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear arms, specifying that the agreement itself was in dispute.

Merkel has also continued to champion the traditional approach to Middle East peacemaking, calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state and for Israel to refrain from taking unilateral steps, such as settlement construction, that could undermine peace prospects.

In contrast, Trump has largely held off from criticizing Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank, recognized Jerusalem as its capital and moved the U.S. Embassy there. He also has cut funding to the Palestinians and fully pinned the blame for stalled Middle East peace talks on them.

But on Thursday the criticism was restrained, with Merkel again advocating for the establishment of a Palestinian state but agreeing to speak to Abbas – following Netanyahu's request – over charges that he is stymieing any new peace talks and plunging Gaza into greater crisis.

"I have promised the prime minister that in the aftermath of the German-Israeli consultations, I will call the Palestinian president. I will inform him and also ask him some questions which also have to do with the situation in Gaza," she said.

"I have heard from the prime minister that we also need to encourage the Palestinian side that they come to the negotiating table and I will do this."

Merkel said that the Palestinians must recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

While Germany has criticized an Israeli High Court ruling to demolish the illegally-built Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar in the West Bank, Merkel said Thursday that the decision was Israel's to make and strongly denied reports that she had threatened to call off the trip if the demolition went forward.

Merkel began the second day of her trip with an emotional tour of the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and museum.

"The Jews in Germany suffered from hatred and violence that the world did not know was possible," she wrote in the memorial's guest book. "What came later is a crime that has no equal – the teardown of civilization – the Holocaust."

From there, she went to a different ceremony in Jerusalem where she was granted an honorary doctorate from the University of Haifa and answered questions from local students. She also met President Reuven Rivlin and toured an innovation exhibit of Israeli and German companies with Netanyahu.

Merkel was accompanied by members of her cabinet, a large business delegation and a new official in charge of combating anti-Semitism. The visit focused on economic issues, with an emphasis on innovation, technology and development projects.

Merkel met Netanyahu for dinner Wednesday night and their ministers were set to sign a series of new agreements, including scientific exchanges and joint projects in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and nanotechnology.