

Is Germany Still a Haven for Israelis? After Election, Some Wonder



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany in 2014. Despite the gains made by the far right in the German elections, Mr. Netanyahu expressed confidence that Israel and Germany would only deepen their ties. CreditAmmar Awad/Reuters
JERUSALEM — Some freaked out.

“That’s it, friends. We can pack,” Avishai Milstein wrote on a Facebook page for Israelis living in Berlin, after the far-right Alternative for Germany shattered a post-World War II taboo by gaining a bloc in Parliament.

Others, glancing around the globe — to other European nations, to the United States, and even back home to Israel — comforted themselves with the fact that the far right remains far from taking control in Germany.

“I don’t think this is a game-changer,” said Guy Weinberger, 47, a Tel Aviv native

who co-founded a marketing company in Berlin. “Trump won. Here, they have only 12 percent.”

Sunday’s national elections in Germany prompted a fresh round of questions about populist election gains across the West. But for many Israelis, thousands of whom have flocked to Berlin in recent years for its socially liberal politics, thriving arts scene and economy, both the campaign and the result were especially problematic.

The Alternative for Germany’s anti-immigration positions and its leaders’ extreme statements, some echoing the language of neo-Nazis, were impossible to ignore. They included calls for Germans to take pride in the performance of their soldiers in the world wars, a lament over a Holocaust monument in Berlin, and a suggestion that a government minister be “disposed of” in Turkey, her family’s homeland.

Were the very things that have made Germany seem so safe to so many Israelis — the national preoccupation with contrition, aversion to raw nationalism, and determination never to repeat the sins of the past — now in danger of being shunted aside by a new generation unburdened by collective guilt and determined to assert its national identity?

Was Israel’s special relationship with Germany, too, now in danger?

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hastened to say that it was not, announcing Tuesday that he had spoken with Chancellor Angela Merkel. He congratulated her on winning and expressed confidence that Israel and Germany would only deepen their ties.

But Mr. Netanyahu added that Israel was “concerned about the rise of anti-Semitism” on both the political right and left, and noted that “there are two different things: denying the Holocaust and denying responsibility.” He called on Ms. Merkel’s new government to “act to strengthen the forces in Germany that take on the historical responsibility.”

Among the opposition, Amir Peretz, a Knesset member from the left-of-center Zionist Union, wrote on Twitter in German that the election was “a bad day for Germany democracy, with the entry of xenophobes and open anti-Semites into the Bundestag.”

Yet like so much else dividing Israeli society today, the advances by the

Alternative for Germany, or the AfD, as it is known, seems to provide more of an excuse for political recriminations and partisan bile than a source of common Jewish ground.

On the right, there was newfound scorn, and worse, for Israeli expatriates in Germany.

Aryeh Eldad, a former Knesset member and medical professor, wrote in Maariv of his revulsion at the “20,000 Israelis who moved from Israel to Germany of their own free will,” whether for “cheaper housing and cheaper cottage cheese” or to live under “the wonderful German democracy” out of a “distorted” leftism. Both groups, he said, were “emotional cripples.”

“These Israelis,” Mr. Eldad wrote, “are not like the dog that comes back to eat his own vomit, but rather like the vomit that returns to the dog that spewed it.”

On the left, there was renewed criticism for the Israeli government that so many left behind when they moved to Germany.

Michael Sappir, a 29-year-old in Tel Aviv who earned a degree in linguistics at the University of Leipzig, in Saxony, and now works in high tech, said the election “makes me think twice about the idea of moving there again, both as a Jew and a leftist.”

But, he added, “the situation in Germany is much, much better than here, where the governing coalition is composed mostly of parties that are intellectually akin to the AfD.” He said, “What’s considered the terrifying right wing there is on many policy points just mainstream here.”

Even after Sunday’s election, Mr. Sappir said, he still believes he would be safer in Germany than in Israel. “The norms of governance, the rule of law, there is much stronger,” he said. “Here I feel like an embattled minority.

There I know that we’re a much bigger minority, and there’s at least a pretty broad anti-fascist consensus.”

Eldad Beck, an Israeli journalist and author of a book on German-Jewish relations, said left-wing Israelis in Germany who were surprised by Sunday’s vote were “suffering from blindness.” But he also said that he knew some Israelis in Germany who had voted for the AfD “because they consider the arrival of so many

Muslims and the violence, terror and criminality a big problem that has to be stopped.”

Indeed, feelings about the subject do not fall into neat categories, even among left-leaning Israelis.

Mr. Weinberger, the marketing executive in Berlin, said he believed that, aside from anti-Merkel sentiment, what had driven Germans to the AfD was an understandable emotion: “There are strong feelings of fear,” he said. “It’s part of human nature at some point. And some of them I’m sure are really concerned about this open-door policy. It affects their lives.”

Shai Levy, 44, a Jerusalem-born filmmaker in Berlin, said he was saddened to see Israel and the Jewish people fueling the resurgent right wing “because they have a common enemy; being anti-Muslim is considered to be good for the Jews.”

He sees many Israelis newly arrived in Berlin tensing up at the sight of people in Muslim head scarves, a “reflex of phobia for Muslims,” he said, adding: “I know it because I had it. I needed to get rid of it.”

Where Germany goes from here, and how Israel and Israelis will adjust, will depend less on Ms. Merkel than on those who succeed her when she leaves the stage, said Mr. Beck, the author of “Germany, at Odds.”

“As long as Merkel is chancellor, the special relationship is O.K.,” he said. “But Israelis will have to make a special effort, otherwise things are going to fall apart.”

He said that the millions of Muslims who have arrived in Germany in recent years would inevitably influence the country’s politics.

“I’m not so sure the young generations of German politicians feel as connected to Israel and to the past,” he warned. “And I don’t see yet that Israel is really making an effort to convince them why it is doing certain things and why it’s important to do those things.”

Younger Israelis, too, can be frustrating to their elders.

To Miki Goldman, 92, a survivor of Auschwitz and other concentration camps who later helped collect evidence against Adolf Eichmann, diplomacy is one thing, but

emigrating to Germany another.

“Undoubtedly Germany of today is a democracy, but it still has a kernel of something else that could become dangerous,” he said. “We can be in good relations with Germany, but why do young Israelis have to forget the fate of their fathers and go back there?”

But some Israelis in Germany insisted they were neither forgetful nor naïve.

Ruthi Grossman, 24, a student who moved to Berlin last year, said she still planned to stay there.

“I think it’s just part of the world moving toward dark times,” she said of the rightward drift. “But I do trust Germany more than I trust any other country in the world to deal with it morally, because of that history.”

Irit Pazner Garshowitz contributed reporting.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/27/world/europe/merkel-election-alternative-for-germany.html>

[Disclaimer]