

**Israel-Hamas war**

## Germany needs to get tougher on Israel, says former Merkel adviser

Munich Security Conference head Christoph Heusgen says Berlin should 'call a spade a spade' on international law



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, left, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv on October 13 2023. Germany has been previously criticised for its unwavering support for Israel © Maya Alleruzzo/Reuters

**Guy Chazan** in Berlin 16 HOURS AGO

The head of the Munich Security Conference has urged Germany to take a tough line on Israel, saying Berlin had a responsibility to call the Netanyahu government out when it violated international law.

In an interview with the Financial Times, Christoph Heusgen, a longtime foreign policy adviser to former chancellor Angela Merkel, strongly criticised [Israel](#) for opposing Palestinian statehood and expanding settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Both policies represented a “violation of international law”, “as is the — to quote President Biden — indiscriminate bombing of Gaza”, Heusgen said.

In such a situation, he said, [Germany](#) “has the responsibility to call a spade a spade”. It should “exploit its good relationship with Israel to keep urging it to abide by international law”, he said.

Germany has been widely criticised for its unwavering support for Israel, which has endured despite the war’s mounting civilian death toll. Berlin’s detractors say its guilt over the Holocaust has blinded it to Israel’s alleged excesses in the Gaza Strip.

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International health authorities say at least 20,000 people have died in Gaza since the start of the war, which broke out after a cross-border attack by Hamas in October that, according to Israeli officials, left 1,200 people dead.

Germany has staunchly defended Israel's right to defend itself and opposed calls for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. It has also supported Israel at the International Court of Justice, where South Africa has brought a case [accusing the Jewish state of genocide](#).

But that has strained Berlin's relations with some countries in the Arab world and in the so-called global south, a group of nations that will be well-represented at the Munich Security Conference next month and whom Heusgen is eager to court.



Christoph Heusgen: '[Germany should] exploit its good relationship with Israel to keep urging it to abide by international law' © Pool/Getty Images

Known as the Davos of defence, the MSC is one of the world's most influential forums for global diplomacy, attracting politicians, generals and intelligence chiefs from all over the world.

Despite the perception that its support of Israel is unconditional, Germany's position has become more nuanced in recent weeks.

Foreign minister Annalena Baerbock recently described life in Gaza as "hell", and has called on the Israeli government to do more to protect Palestinians in the West Bank from attacks by extremist settlers.

She has also complained to Israel about delays in the delivery of humanitarian aid to besieged Gaza and demanded it do more to avoid civilian casualties in its war on Hamas.

German officials also lambasted a convention in Jerusalem at the weekend, attended by senior figures in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government, that called for Israel to [expand its settlements into Gaza](#).

“The idea of deporting the Palestinian population from Gaza and recreating settlements [there] are completely unacceptable,” Sebastian Fischer, German foreign ministry spokesperson, said on Monday. “Whoever thinks you can achieve security for Israel through fantasies of deportation is clearly on the wrong track.”

Still, Heusgen suggested that Germany could afford to take a tougher line. He noted that 153 countries had voted for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza at the UN General Assembly in December — Germany abstained — and described settlements on occupied territory as a “flagrant violation of international law”.

Asked about Netanyahu's rejection of a two-state solution, Heusgen said he did not know “how Israel envisages its future when it doesn't want a Palestinian state and will have to erect high fences around Palestinian areas”.

Heusgen was Merkel's adviser when she first articulated the idea that Israel's security was Germany's “*Staatsräson*”, or in its national interest. He said that meant Germany would not hesitate to provide Israel with all the weapons it needed to protect itself from its enemies.

But it also meant that Germany should be able to criticise its ally.

“If we arrive at the view that the way the Israeli government is behaving endangers the country's security, we have to come out and say that,” he said. “I don't believe that continuing to violate international law by building settlements strengthens Israel's security.”

