

# The German Left and Israel

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The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation recently opened up offices in Tel Aviv.

Recently, the office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the foundation of the German left-wing party Die Linke, was ceremoniously opened in Tel Aviv. In the wake of this event, I wish to share with my friends in struggle against the Israeli occupation a brief review of the relation to Israel of the German Left, particularly the political parties, and to raise several queries concerning the desired cooperation with said parties.

In Germany, the public discourse concerning Israel and its policies is understandably a most sensitive matter. Open criticism toward the state of Israel and its policies is very quickly classified as anti-Semitic, and the primary media outlets openly declare their support of Israel. The politics of the German regime, whether from the "Left" or the Right, openly acknowledge that protecting the security of the state of Israel (as a Jewish state, of course) is part of the *raison d'état* of Germany, and provide almost unconditional support for Israel in international forums. Germany represents one of the most important countries for Israel from the perspective of international politics, the trade and supply of weapons and perhaps only with Italy under the current neo-fascist regime can it compete for the title of Israel's most loyal partner in the European Union, and prevent any attempt to increase pressure on Israel and enthusiastically promotes the upgrade of EU-Israel relations.

One of the reasons for the love affair between Germany and Israel is further connected to the weakness of the German Left in criticizing Israel. Here, German history serves as an insufficient explanation for the overall general resistance to supporting the Palestinian (and Israeli) struggle against the occupation. Islamophobia and racism, in addition to a complete lack of dealing with the colonial past of Germany further represent for the Left ground in which the lack of a desire to criticize Israel rests. Although I do not wish to go deeply into this matter here, the existence of a dubious ideological strand which dubs or dubbed itself "anti-German," and from its objection to German nationalism supported the Iraq War and the invasion of Afghanistan and demands "unconditional solidarity" with the state of Israel (yes, this is as crazy as it sounds), also impacts the various left-wing circles and inhibits any type of critical discussion toward the state of Israel or even the United States from within the radical Left.

The German left-wing political party, Die Linke, is a very new party in Germany, founded just two years ago from a combination of the Democratic Socialist party (a reincarnation of the ruling party in East Germany, which founded the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in 1990), a group of dissenters from the Social Democratic Party (headed by Oskar LaFontaine) and several other groups from the radical Left. Since its establishment, the party has enjoyed numerous successes in local and regional German elections, but it remains in West Germany a partially boycotted party with which the Social-Democrats refuse to establish a government.

Since its establishment, the party has conducted numerous ideological and political discussions, whether consciously or unconsciously, around the attempts of many of its leaders to integrate into the German political system through "moderation" and a renunciation of "extreme" positions. An internalization of the German consensus against "extremism from Right and from Left" is also expressed in that criticism sharper than that of the director of Peace Now against Israeli policy would be considered by many party leaders as an extreme position that will threaten the chances of

the party to be perceived as legitimate for partnership in the government.

Indeed, also within the Left party there are politicians who openly declare their support for the state of Israel and its policies: within the youth movement of the party there exists a group that calls itself by the Hebrew word "shalom" and with funding from the party organizes events on behalf of Israel, distributes racist and militaristic propaganda and terrorizes any party member who dares to criticize Israel. One of the party leaders, Gregor Gysi, declared already one year ago his solidarity with Israel and called for the dumping of the Left's anti-Semitism into the trash of history. A party member of the Berlin Council participated in a demonstration in support of Israel during the "Cast Lead" massacre and a mayoral candidate in the city of Duisburg, who expressed his support for the international campaign of boycott and sanctions against Israel, was forced to resign from his position after the party refused to continue supporting him.

The range of discussions within the German Left about Israel can perhaps interest the few of us who reside in Germany or those interested in left-wing polemics. However, the weakness of the German Left in expressing solidarity with our struggle further impacts Germany's foreign policy and the international campaigns against the Israeli occupation. The opening of the Rosa Luxemburg office in Tel Aviv can provide an opportunity to express our protest at the lack of solidarity from the German Left and represent the first step in establishing a direct and honest dialogue with left-wing forces in Germany.

There are few members of the Israeli Left active in Germany: apart from the dear Uri Avnery (who defines himself as a Zionist and is not from the radical Left), there exist almost no critical voices of activists against the occupation. German speaking Israeli intellectuals are often interviewed for the left-wing papers, but they generally do not make a clear call for political action against the Israeli occupation and speak too much in interviews.

The German Left and the left-wing political party need a clear and strong voice from our side in order to facilitate the existence of an active and critical discourse toward Israel. Racism and anti-Semitism play here a substantial role, and our voice as Israeli citizens or Jews possesses a stronger effect than that of our partners in the occupied territories. Our right and obligation as left-wing activists in Israel is to demand clear explanations from the left-wing German party for its statements in support of the Israeli regime by party leaders. Public statements by the Israeli Communist Party or Hadash can be regularly sent to the German party institutions with a demand for involvement in the anti-occupation protest. A call to vote against an upgrade of EU economic relations with Israel coming from left-wing activists from Israel can convince the party in the European parliament to do something in the matter, and a letter of support for the former mayoral candidate of Duisburg from the Women's Coalition for Peace can perhaps lessen the level of animosity directed at him.

Our intervention as Israelis in the discussion being conducted about our state in Germany is essential and does not require prior knowledge of the specific conditions of the German Left. I do not believe that knowing the ins and outs of the various left-wing groups is essential to the topic and I would not recommend to anyone to dive into the depths of the ideological nonsense created by the Left, known for its love of theory and reticence from praxis.

The long and tiring ideological discussions concerning German-Israeli relations can be left for the day that the occupation ends. In the meantime, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation should fulfill its obligation and support those groups that continue in the path of that same stubborn Polish Jew in Palestine and Israel and work to promote her messages throughout Germany.

**Yossi Bartal**

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*Yossi Bartal, a former staff member of the Alternative Information Center (AIC), is active in Anarchists against Walls and has been residing in Berlin for the past two years. This article originally appeared in Hebrew in "Haockets" and was translated to English by the AIC. The article generated substantial discussion amongst Israeli activists, such that Bartal later added the following clarifications:*

Already from the beginning this article is clearly directed to my friends in struggle against the racist separation regime of Israel. I did not attempt to speak with the general public, I did not attempt to convince anyone and I did not try to save the moral image of my dear people; I only wished to share with those close to me in my worldview things happening in another part of the world that impact us.

I also did not try and provide a complete description of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation or the left-wing party. I simply attempted to clarify one problematic aspect of their activities, in my view. In both the party and foundation there are people close to the radical Left in Israel, people who support putting international pressure on the Israeli government and promoting a just peace, and I wished to clarify that these people are coming under increasing pressure from senior members of the party.

It amuses me that talk about foundations can set certain people off. Foundations are large, bureaucratic bodies, where mutual back scratching occurs and political and personal pressures play a large role. For the Israeli Left, even the radical Left, it is often convenient to ignore the problematic of the relations of donors and recipients: who here doesn't know stories of "well phrased" and pleasing words to foundations, the foggy language used to describe a project so that it won't sound too political, political conditions or prohibitions...the activities of large foundations and non-governmental institutions often act as a type of hidden colonialism that attempts to act where the army cannot ...or the interest is to push for a de-politicization of a social movement, or to quash guilty feelings at the lowest possible cost.

In summary, large foundations, political parties and NGOs, even the most left-wing amongst them, are not innocent and nice like in their brochures. It is important to recognize this reality before working with them and to know their political location, internal conflicts, with what mandate and for what purpose they are acting. It is most important to know how to overcome, if only a little, the absolute inequality in such relations. Knowledge of the politics, the various pressures and the funding sources of the foundations themselves can assist.

I never wrote anywhere that the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation should not support Israeli organizations, only that it should support radical groups that continue Rosa's tradition of opposition to the regime, the struggle against militarism and racism and her support for militant workers' struggles. I have no idea how my article could have been interpreted in any other way.

What is true is that I would prefer that not one Euro would come to Israel or Palestine in exchange that they would boycott the Israeli government, kick out its ambassadors and enforce international isolation until Israel retreats from the occupied Palestinian territories or provides to all living under its rule equal rights. To my sorrow this is not so realistic at the moment. I do believe that all the European financial contributions are worthless without political pressure, and here in my opinion is the primary failure of the Israeli human rights and left-wing groups, that they do not clarify this point to the donors.

The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation has just begun working in Israel. We must see how it will behave, what it intends to do and what political pressures it directs at the organizations it supports. I do believe that its first conference in Israel could have been organized closer to the spirit of Rosa than that of the Meretz party leaders, and perhaps it was possible to allow not such white people to speak on stage. However, at least the representation of women speakers was higher than at most academic conferences.

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\* From <http://www.alternativenews.org/content/view/1644/88/>.