

Gaza and Israel: the gagging frenzy of a Germany in denial

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Since the October 7th Hamas attacks and the subsequent Israeli offensive in Gaza, the German authorities and cultural institutions have embarked on a heavy-handed censorship against those who denounce the massive death toll of Palestinian civilians. Along with bans on demonstrations, there has been a wave of cancellations of cultural events involving artists, writers and thinkers who, because of their opposition to the war in Gaza, are accused of anti-Semitism, including Jewish critics of the Israeli government. As Mathieu Magnaudeix reports from Berlin, the gagging frenzy and staunch support for Israel across the German political class, regarded as a *raison d'état*, is rooted in the country's shame of its Nazi past.

Contents

- [‘Israel haters’](#)
- [Anti-Semitism and so-called](#)
- [A raft of cancellations](#)

Meeting with Mediapart in a café in the Berlin quarter of Neukölln, Israeli filmmaker and writer Alon Sahar, 39, recounted the drama of this year's Berlinale, the annual international film festival held every February in the German capital, and which sparked nationwide controversy. "Alongside Venice and Cannes, Berlinale is the most political of the major festivals. I knew that this was going to explode in some way," he said.

He was referring to the heated opinions about the war in Gaza following the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7th, and the horrific civilian death toll. About 1,200 people, mostly civilians were slaughtered in the Hamas attacks on Israel. According to the latest figures issued on April 14th by the Hamas-controlled health ministry in Gaza, at least 33,729 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the war.

Alon Sahar has made two award-winning films in Israel; [Gelem](#) (2014), about the suicide of an Israeli soldier, a subject he said was for long a taboo, and [Out](#) (2018), about the true story of a far-right activist who infiltrated the Israeli NGO [Breaking The Silence](#). Sahar left Israel for Berlin in 2020, to be able, he said, to create his work in "freedom", far from [intimidations and threats of censorship](#).

"At the [*Berlinale*] festival, people come from all over the world," he said. "And it's also super diverse among the workers. But it is publicly funded by the state. Germany wants to uphold universal values and international law, but it's supporting Israel. So, there's a clash."

Indian-American film director [Suneil Sanzgiri](#) was one of several to withdraw their films from the festival in protest at what they said was the censorship of pro-Palestinian voices in Germany, and the

Berlinale's complicity in that. As of the festival's opening on February 15th, pro-Palestinian [protests disrupted events](#), while one of the Berlinale's Instagram accounts was hacked and splashed with slogans including "Stop the genocide" and "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" - the latter slogan regarded as sympathetic to Hamas ideology and as such banned from public expression in Berlin since last October.

Mediapart has seen the contents of an exchange of internal emails by some of the festival's staff calling, in vain, for a declaration in favour of a ceasefire in Gaza to be made during the event. A group of festival workers also published an [open letter](#) calling on the organisers to adopt a "stronger institutional stance" on what they called "the current assault on Palestinian life".

For its 2023 edition, the organisers of the Berlinale issued a statement saying it "strongly condemns the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine", and featured a video linkup with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. At this year's festival, the organisers declared that "Our sympathy goes out to all the victims of the humanitarian crises in the Middle East and elsewhere", without specifically mentioning the civilian population in Gaza.

During this year's Berlinale, Alon Sahar took part in a [discussion](#) with documentary makers Basel Adra, a Palestinian, and Yuval Abraham, an Israeli. Their film [No Other Land](#) was premiered at the festival, where it won the award for best documentary. It recounts the evacuations and destruction of homes in the Palestinian West Bank hamlets of Masafer Yatta, where Adra comes from, by Israeli settlers and armed forces. "They didn't tape it, which I found kind of weird," said Sahar. "Nobody disturbed [*the discussion*], I was really surprised. It was a kind of bubble for a couple hours, amid actions, protests."

Basel Adra (left) and Yuval Abraham on stage at this year's Berlinale to receive the festival's best documentary award for No Other Land, February 24th 2024. © Halil Sagirkaya/Anadolu

On the evening of February 24th, when the pair were awarded the best documentary prize, the tone was grave. In his acceptance speech, Adra said it was "very hard" to rejoice over the award "when there are tens of thousands of my people being slaughtered and massacred by Israel in Gaza," and called on Germany to "stop sending weapons to Israel".

Abraham told the audience: "We are standing in front of you now, me and Basel are the same age. I am Israeli; Basel is Palestinian. And in two days we will go back to a land where we are not equal."

"I am living under a civilian law and Basel is under military law," Abraham said. "We live 30 minutes from one another, but I have voting rights. Basel is not having voting rights. I'm free to move where I want in this land. Basel is, like millions of Palestinians, locked in the occupied West Bank. This situation of apartheid between us, this inequality, it has to end."

US filmmaker Ben Russell, whose documentary [Direct Action](#), made with French director Guillaume Cailleau (about the 2009-2018 protest occupation of a rural site in north-west France, Notre-Dame-des-Landes, earmarked for the construction of an airport) took to the stage wearing a Palestinian scarf, and accused Israel of committing "genocide" in Gaza.

The fierce criticism voiced at the festival against Israel's offensive in Gaza triggered an explosion of anger. Kai Wegner, mayor of Berlin and member of the conservative CDU party, took to X (the former Twitter) to post: "It's Hamas which is responsible for the profound suffering in Israel and in the Gaza Strip". Berlin's culture minister, Joe Chialo, also from the CDU, denounced the speeches as "anti-Israeli propaganda". German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's spokeswoman, Christiane Hoffmann, told the press that it was "unacceptable" that "the terrorist attack by Hamas on 7 October was not

mentioned". She said that Scholz "agrees that such a one-sided stance cannot be allowed to stand".

While Germany's justice minister announced possible legal action over the comments made at the festival, Claudia Roth, the federal government's commissioner for culture and the media, a member of The Greens party, took to Instagram to denounce "shockingly one-sided" speeches which she said were "characterized by a deep hatred of Israel". However, German tabloid *Bild* published a photo of Roth apparently applauding the speeches of Adra and Abraham. By way of an explanation, she said that she was applauding Abraham's support for a "political solution".

There was also widespread condemnation in the press of the speeches and comments at the Berlinale, from conservative-leaning titles (and notably among the Springer group, [denouncing](#) a "hatred of Israel") to left-leaning titles like *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, in which the journalist Nils Minkmar [slammed](#) what he called "anti-Semitic propaganda". The editor of the Berlin liberal daily *Tagespiegel* described the festival ceremonies as "painful, shameful, disturbing", while national daily *Die Welt* and news weekly *Stern* lambasted what they said was a state-funded, anti-Israeli cultural world.

"Once again, the German cultural scene showcases its bias by rolling out the red carpet exclusively for artists who promote the delegitimization of Israel," wrote Israel's ambassador to Germany, [Ron Prosor](#), in a post on X (the former Twitter), adding that "anti-Semitic and anti-Israel discourse was met with applause".

Meeting with Mediapart last month, Alon Sahar spoke how the reactions stoked his fears. "Since October 7th, Palestinian voices are being fought against in Germany," he said. "I knew Germany has this special relationship with Israel because of the Holocaust. But I didn't think it would go down to that level. It reminds me of the threats of censorship I experienced in Israel. That is completely insane. Because it's also like a kind of leftwing government doing it. It doesn't look good. I fear this foretells of twenty years of the hard-right."

The German far-right party AfD, which was revealed as having taken part in a secret meeting held last November with other extremists to discuss a plan for the [mass deportations of people from Germany](#), and which opinion polls have for months placed second, behind the conservatives, in voting intentions, has paradoxically adopted a position of support for Israel since the October 7th Hamas attacks, calling for an end to German funding of the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA).

German interior ministry figures showed a 29% year-on-year rise in recorded anti-Semitic crimes during 2021, and of the 3,027 offences, more than 80 percent were found to have been committed by rightwing extremists. In October 2019, two people were shot dead and another two wounded during an attack by a lone gunman on a synagogue in the city of Halle, in Saxony-Anhalt, in what investigators said was an act of far-right, anti-Semitic terrorism.

Following the start of Israel's offensive in Gaza, Germany has recorded a [dramatic rise](#) in anti-Semitic incidents, including a failed firebomb attack on a Berlin synagogue. Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office reported that over the three and a half months from early October, there were 2,249 recorded anti-Semitic attacks, a figure that was higher than the number recorded for the whole of 2022.

For Berlin, the massacres committed in Israel by Hamas on October 7th echoed the horrors of the Nazi regime and since the attacks, the Israeli national flag flies alongside that of Germany and of Ukraine on numerous official buildings.

On October 12th, Chancellor Scholz addressed the federal parliament, the Bundestag. “Israel has the right to defend itself [...], and its citizens against this barbaric attack,” he told Members of Parliament (MPs). “In this moment, there is only one place for Germany to be – alongside Israel.”

“The security of Israel is our reason of state,” he continued. “Our own history, our responsibility that results from the Holocaust, creates for us an enduring duty, that of standing up for the existence and security of Israel.”

The German government has increased its delivery of military hardware to Israel, including tanks and offensive weapons as well as equipment, the value of which reached 326.5 million dollars in 2023, ten times more than in 2022. Last week, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) began hearing a case [brought against Germany by Nicaragua](#) which argues that German arms sales to Israel are a breach of the UN genocide convention. In December, Germany vigorously opposed the case brought by South Africa before the ICJ in which it accused Israel of the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza.

For months following the Israeli offensive in Gaza, Berlin, like London, stood against demands for a ceasefire, preferring instead to call for “humanitarian pauses” to allow aid to reach the civilian population.

Shortly after the October 7th attacks, activists from an organisation called Samidoun, which describes itself as a “network of solidarity with Palestinian prisoners”, celebrated the Hamas massacres by handing out pastries to passers-by in the Berlin quarter of Neukölln, which has a large Muslim population. Amid widespread indignation at the stunt, Samidoun was soon outlawed in Germany. “Holding spontaneous ‘jubilant celebrations’ here in Germany in response to Hamas’s terrible terrorist attacks against Israel demonstrates Samidoun’s anti-Semitic, inhuman worldview in a particularly sickening way,” [said](#) interior minister Nancy Faeser.

Both Judaeophobia and Islamophobia have increased in Germany in the wake of the Hamas attack, Israel’s scorched-earth assault on Gaza and the German government’s crackdown on public displays of support for Palestine.

Indian essayist and novelist Pankaj Mishra, writing in the London Review of Books

In an atmosphere of panic, pro-Palestinian demonstrations were banned, and in Berlin the police warned of an “imminent danger” of “seditious and anti-Semitic declarations”. Hundreds of demonstrators have been arrested for defying the bans. “It’s not new but it’s more and more extreme,” said Diana Nazzal, an activist with the pro-Palestinian network [Palestine Speaks](#). “You don’t hear Palestinian voices. Our narratives and words are twisted. And they try to portray us as Islamists or terrorists.”

Marchers defying a ban on their pro-Palestinian demonstration held in Hamburg on October 23rd 2023. © Georg Wendt / DPA

Some media pointed to an anti-Semitism that is imported by immigrants and promoted amid “[parallel societies](#)”. In a cover-story interview with the centre-left news weekly [Der Spiegel](#) published on October 20th, Olaf Scholz spoke of “expelling on a large scale those who do not have the right to remain in Germany”. Meanwhile, Friedrich Merz, leader of the conservative CDU party, when questioned about whether Germany should welcome refugees from Gaza, declared that, “We’ve enough of anti-Semitic young men in this country”.

On October 13th, Berlin’s education senator, Katharina Günther-Wünsch, also from the CDU, sent a letter to the capital’s schools authorising them, if they so decide, to ban students from wearing “pro-Palestinian symbols such as the keffiyeh” and the Palestinian flag.

Writing in the [London Review of Books](#) in January, the Indian essayist and novelist Pankaj Mishra noted: “The ‘general German social problem of antisemitism’ [*sic*] is projected onto a minority of Arab immigrants, who are then further stigmatised as ‘the most unrepentant antisemites’ in need of ‘additional education and disciplining’.”

He continued: “Both Judaeophobia and Islamophobia have increased in Germany in the wake of the Hamas attack, Israel’s scorched-earth assault on Gaza and the German government’s crackdown on public displays of support for Palestine. The German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier [*editor’s note: a member of the social-democrat SPD party*], recently urged all those in Germany with ‘Arab roots’ to disavow hatred of Jews and denounce Hamas. The vice chancellor, Robert Habeck [*from the Greens party*], followed with a more explicit warning to Muslims: they would be tolerated in Germany only if they rejected antisemitism.”

‘Israel haters’

Udi Ratz is a 37-year-old Israeli woman, originally from Haifa. In 2009, one of her friends was killed in a shooting attack at the offices of the Tel Aviv Gay and Lesbian Association. “Netanyahu claimed they’d do everything to find who did that. But until nowadays, we don’t know,” she said. The following year she left Israel. “I was forced to look for a safer place as a queer person. So I came to Berlin.”

She latterly worked as a freelance guide for visitors to the Jewish Museum Berlin. Opened in 2001, it is the biggest Jewish museum in Europe and is dedicated to the history of Germany’s Jewish population from the Middle Ages to modern times.

At the end of her guided tour, Udi would talk about the situation in the occupied West Bank and describe the situation there as one of apartheid, a term which she insisted was “used by Human Rights Watch and Israeli NGO [B’Tselem](#)”. Outside of her work, Ratz is also an activist. Leftwing, anti-Zionist, she is a member of the governing board of the association Jüdische Stimme für gerechten Frieden in Nahost (Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East).

On October 6th, the day before the Hamas attacks against Israel, Ratz received an email from the museum’s management, and which Mediapart has seen. “The concept of apartheid is loaded and can be polarizing,” it read, and urged her not to use the word of her own initiative so as not to damage the reputation of the museum. But after she persisted, the museum management removed her access for guided tours.

The tabloid daily *Bild Zeitung* reported the story, describing Ratz as a “Israel-Hasser” – someone who hates Israel – a term which is used against many who voice pro-Palestinian views. “It went viral,” Ratz said of her case. “I constantly get harassing messages on social media, even life-

threatening messages. I am not the only person to whom it happens. Any Jewish person nowadays in Germany who talks critically about the racist policy of the state of Israel will tell you they get death threats.”

Situated in the heart of Berlin is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (also called the Holocaust Memorial), where 2,711 concrete slabs are arranged across a 19,000-square-metre site. © Maxime Gruss / Hans Lucas

In May 2019, a large majority of German MPs voted in favour a motion denouncing the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel as anti-Semitic. The approved resolution called on the government not to support events by BDS or its allies, and pledged that the German parliament would not fund any activities by BDS or its allies.

It argued that the BDS campaign’s “calls to boycott Israeli artists, along with stickers on Israeli goods that are meant to dissuade people from buying them, are also reminiscent of the most terrible phase of German history. The BDS movement’s ‘Don’t Buy’ stickers on Israeli products inevitably awake associations with the Nazi slogan ‘Don’t Buy from Jews!’ and similar scrawls on facades and shop windows”.

Anti-Semitism and so-called ‘philosemitic McCarthyism’

In 2020, the Cameroonian historian and philosopher Achille Mbembe, who signed a petition by the BDS movement, found himself at the centre of [controversy](#). Mbembe had been invited as a guest speaker for the opening of the annual Ruhrtriennale arts festival, and the move was publicly criticised by Felix Klein, Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Anti-Semitism, who accused Mbembe of relativising the Holocaust in his writings. Mbembe strongly denied what he called the “shameful allegations” levelled against him, and insisted that he regarded anti-Semitism as “a terrible crime”. In the event, the festival was cancelled due to the Covid-19 epidemic.

Following the Hamas attacks of October last year, many among the German media and cultural and educational institutions carried out checks on the recent and past positions adopted by artists, staff and contributors. An account has been set up on Instagram, the [Archive of Silence](#), which lists cases of cancelled events, sackings and pressure allegedly resulting from such scrutiny. In an op-ed article [published in *The New York Review*](#) last October, US philosopher and writer Susan Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, close to Berlin, argued that “Germans’ efforts to confront their country’s criminal history and to root out antisemitism have shifted from vigilance to a philosemitic McCarthyism that threatens their rich cultural life”.

One week after October 7th last year, came the opening of the annual Frankfurt Book Fair, the largest of its kind in Europe. The Palestinian author and essayist Adania Shibli was due to be honoured at the fair with the 2023 LiBeraturpreis, an annual award for women writers from Asia, Africa, Latin America or the Arab world. Shibli had been chosen for her novel [Minor Detail](#), which is based on the true story of the 1949 gang rape and murder of a Bedouin girl by Israeli soldiers.

Minor Detail received both positive and negative reviews in Germany. One of the latter, published in the Left-leaning daily *Tageszeitung (Taz)*, argued that “all Israelis in this short novel are anonymous rapists or killers, while the Palestinians are victims of poisoned or trigger-happy occupiers”. Meanwhile, a member of the LiBeraturpreis jury, the author and journalist Ulrich Noller, had earlier in the year stood down in protest at the decision taken last summer to honour the novel, which he said served “anti-Israel and anti-Semitic narratives”.

Just two days before Shibli was due to collect her award, the organisers of the event, LitProm, announced that the prize-giving had been indefinitely postponed. It also cancelled a planned discussion event at the book fair with Shibli and her German translator. Meanwhile, hundreds of actors in the publishing world, including the publishers and translators of *Minor Detail* from around the globe, and also authors such as Colm Tóibín, Ian McEwan, and the Nobel Prize in Literature winners Annie Ernaux, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Olga Tokarczuk, signed an [open letter](#) of protest at the treatment of the Palestinian author. The open letter has now attracted more than one thousand signatories.

The German edition of Adania Shibli's novel, published in English under the title Minor Detail. © Kirill Kudryavtsev / AFP

In January this year, the LitProm board and jury members issued [a statement](#) in which they publicly apologised to Shibli “for the difficulties that have arisen for her in connection with the planned presentation of the Liberatur Prize”. They admitted wrongly stating that the postponement of the prize-giving was taken with the author’s agreement. “It was never our intention to question the awarding of the prize to Adania Shibli,” the statement read. “We firmly reject the accusations and defamations made against her and her book in parts of the press as unfounded.”

“With the escalation of the war between Israel and Hamas and against the background of the polarising situation in Germany as well, we thought it right to hold the award ceremony at a different time in a less politically charged atmosphere — also to avoid possible disturbances or even attacks on Adania Shibli’s person.”

A raft of cancellations

In November, the organisers of the “Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie 2024”, an exhibition of contemporary photography due to be held in March this year in the three German cities of Heidelberg, Mannheim and Ludwigshafen, cancelled the event. Officials explained that the decision was made after discovering that one of the three curators of the event, Bangladeshi photojournalist Shahidul Alam, had posted on social media content that may be regarded as anti-Semitic. “This includes an uncommented interview by Shahidul Alam with the Palestinian ambassador to Bangladesh, a comparison of the current war with the Holocaust and accusations of genocide by the state of Israel against the Palestinian population in Gaza,” read a statement by the organisers. They said that it was after Alam’s two co-curators, Tanzim Wahab and Munem Wasif, refused to continue their work without him, that it was “clear” the event could no longer be held.

Also in November, the Museum Folkwang in Essen cancelled part of a planned multi-curated show because of one of the curator’s social media posts about the situation in Gaza. As reported by [Art News](#), the curator in question, US-based Haitian writer Anaïs Duplan, revealed an email received from the museum’s director Peter Gorschlüter announcing that their collaboration was “suspended”.

“We noticed that you shared and commented on a number of posts on your Instagram channel in the light of the current situation in Israel and Gaza,” wrote Gorschlüter. “From our perspective some of these posts are unacceptable. These posts do not acknowledge the [*Hamas*] terroristic attack and consider the Israeli military occupation in Gaza a genocide.”

Gorschlüter added that consequently, “the museum might be considered to support antisemitic tendencies and voices that question the very right of existence of the state Israel”.

Meanwhile, public funding of the Oyoun cultural centre in Berlin was cut off after its management

failed to cancel a conference organised by the leftwing anti-Zionist group, Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East. An audio-video work by South African artist Candice Breitz which was due to be shown this spring at the Saarland Museum's Modern Gallery [was cancelled](#) last November. The Jewish artist said she was told that this was because an official from the local art academy believed – wrongly – that she was a supporter of the BDS movement.

In December 2023, the Heinrich-Böll Foundation, affiliated to The Greens party, called off the planned awarding of its Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought to the Russian-American writer and journalist Masha Gessen. The foundation said its move was over an “unacceptable” essay by Gessen that had been published earlier that month in [The New Yorker](#) magazine. In it, Gessen, who is Jewish and whose family members died in the Holocaust, made the comparison between the situation in Gaza and Jewish ghettos in Europe. “Presumably, the more fitting term ‘ghetto’ would have drawn fire for comparing the predicament of besieged Gazans to that of ghettoized Jews,” wrote Gessen. “It also would have given us the language to describe what is happening in Gaza now. The ghetto is being liquidated.”

The Hannah Arendt Prize is named after the late German-American Jewish philosopher and historian, who was herself critical of contemporary Zionism. Writing in *The Guardian* about the Heinrich-Böll Foundation's treatment of Gessen, Samantha Hill, author of a biography of Arendt and also of a book of translations of her poems, wryly observed that today in Germany “Hannah Arendt would not qualify for the Hannah Arendt prize” and would be “cancelled”.

As soon as you start using the word Holocaust, as soon as you start using the word anti-Semitism, Germans get scared.

Writer and essayist Deborah Feldman

“They’re going too far,” Deborah Feldman told *Mediapart*, seated at her favourite Berlin restaurant. The 37-year-old US-born writer and essayist enjoys the controversies she provokes. She grew up in Brooklyn, New York, speaking Yiddish within a Satmar Hasidic family, before breaking out from the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in her early adulthood. She wrote a best-selling book, *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*, published in 2012, recounting that rupture and her early life, which was adapted by Netflix into a mini-series entitled *Unorthodox*.

Last summer, her latest book, [Judenfetisch](#) (Jew Fetish), was published in Germany, her adopted country since 2014, and which was met with mixed reaction. In it, she tackles the German state for building what she calls a “transactional relationship” with Jewish communities. Jewish culture, she argues, is “fetishised” to the point where some convert to Judaism while others, she says, are pseudo-converts whose Jewishness resides in their loyalty to Israel.

Feldman is damning of the atmosphere in Germany following the eruption of the war in Gaza; she slams the “provincialism” of German elites and the “mass hysteria” of reactions by which “everything has become anti-Semitic”. Her targets are politicians, journalists and Jewish

personalities who are diehard supporters of the Israeli government to the point, she says, of “shooting themselves in the foot”.

Deborah Feldman pictured here at a literature festival in Cologne in March 2024. © Horst Galuschka/dpa

Her critics accuse her of being arrogant and aggressive. Feldman laughs that off. “They say I’m crazy, they don’t say I’m wrong,” she said. “My sources of income are very independent. I have my own community of people who support me. I already rejected my family [...] It doesn’t interest me to have a ‘good’ reputation.”

Her German is perfect. “I’m a German Jew, my family was here in Germany since the 1300s. They were deported. Almost my entire family was gassed in Auschwitz,” she underlined. “If anybody has a right to be here and tell Germans what it means to be Jewish, I have that right.”

Along with 130 Jewish writers, academics, journalists and artists, she co-signed an open letter published on October 23rd last year under the title [Freedom for the One Who Thinks Differently](#), which slammed the “arbitrary restrictions” placed on “legitimate nonviolent political expression that may include criticisms of Israel”.

“As soon as you start using the word Holocaust, as soon as you start using the word anti-Semitism, Germans get scared,” said Feldman. “So they need somebody to tell them: don’t believe the perfidious distortions of the word anti-Semitism that your politicians are performing.”

Among those who Feldman takes to task on social media is Felix Klein, Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Anti-Semitism (a post created in 2018). After the Berlinale, he criticised the “anti-Semitic narratives” of some of the attendees. “It’s always astonishing to hear artists, feminists, queers, speak out for the Palestinian cause and against Israel while not talking about Hamas, whereas Hamas, according to its ideology, pledges an early and cruel death to them,” said Klein.

in an interview with the German regional press, Klein argued: “In Germany, anti-Semitism has always had particular significance because there is this backdrop of the Holocaust. That is why the limits on what can be said here are narrower than elsewhere.”

“The limit is crossed when Israel is delegitimized and demonized,” said Klein. “For example, when it is described as an apartheid state or when comparisons are made with the crimes of the Nazis, when the Gaza Strip is described as a concentration camp, or the Israeli army as criminal.”

Klein’s “limits” are in part drawn from a 2016 [Working definition of antisemitism](#), a text conceived by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), a Berlin-based intergovernmental organisation to promote education and remembrance of the Holocaust and genocide of the Roma. The text has been approved in a legally non-binding manner by [25 European states](#) and the United States.

The IHRA definition cites non-exhaustive illustrative examples of anti-Semitism, including “Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel”, “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor”, and “Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis”.

In an [op-ed article](#) published in *The Boston Globe* in February this year, the person who drew up the IHRA text, Kenneth Stern, expressed his concerns that it could be misused to “chill free speech” concerning criticism of Israeli government policies.

“For decades, there has only been one official Jewish position in Germany, and it was always, always representing Israel’s political interest,” said Deborah Feldman. “That worked when it was a secular, democratic state, when Muslims weren’t such a big voice in this country [*Germany*] and social media didn’t exist. But they’re still stuck in this political pattern. And nobody wants to be the first to break [*it*] because everyone is terrified.”

Germany has a very solid one-sided view, a very one-sided empathy, one-sided solidarity.

Political scientist Daniel Marwecki

Political scientist Daniel Marwecki, a lecturer in the department of politics and public administration at the University of Hong Kong, analyses that “pattern”, as Feldman describes it, in his book *Germany and Israel: Whitewashing and Statebuilding* (Hurst, 2020), about the support of Israel by Germany since the end of the Second World War, and which has just recently been published in German.

“The history of German policy towards Israel is relatively unknown in Germany, which is mainly due to the narcissistic nature of German discourse on the Middle East: when Germans talk about Israel, they are usually talking about themselves,” Marwecki wrote in [an article](#) published last month by the Berlin-based Rosa Luxembourg Foundation . “That means that the more discourse there is, the more ignorance is produced.”

In that article, which draws in part from his book, he recounts how, as of the early 1950s, West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany, founded in 1949), became the major military and industrial ally of the fledgling state of Israel. It sought rehabilitation for its recent Nazi past, even though there had been no thorough denazification.

Between 1953 and 1965, writes Marwecki, “West Germany was the only country to provide Israel with all three common forms of intergovernmental support: economic aid via the Reparations Agreement, secret military aid for war efforts, and a generous financial grant agreed upon in 1960.”

“If one adds up the German aid to Israel and compare it with that provided by the US, England, and France, it becomes clear that [*West*] Germany, of all countries, was Israel’s most important supporter during its precarious early days.”

Marwecki outlines how, during the 1990s following the reunification of Germany, it encouraged the Oslo Accords peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (which would free Germany to finance Palestinian organisations), and, finally, how support for Israel became over recent years an ideological pillar of the large German political parties. “For the German mainstream, being pro-Israel is to be pro-German democracy,” Marwecki told Mediapart.

In March 2008, the then German chancellor Angela Merkel addressed the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, when she insisted: “Especially in this place, I emphasize: every German government and every chancellor before me was committed to the special responsibility Germany has for Israel’s

security.” Israel’s security, Merkel said, was part of the German “*Staatsräson*” (raisons d’état, or reasons of state).

Speaking in German, which led some Israeli lawmakers to boycott the speech, she added: “The mass murder of six million Jews, carried out in the name of Germany, has brought indescribable suffering to the Jewish people, Europe and the entire world. The Shoah fills us Germans with shame. I bow before the victims. I bow before the survivors and before all those who helped them survive.”

For Germany’s political leaders, support for Israel became a political dogma, setting in stone the country’s examination and recognition of its past. “Israel’s right to existence is [*also*] our own,” declared Katrin Göring-Eckhardt, then leader of The Greens party, in a 2018 speech before the German parliament, the Bundestag, during a session marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel.

“Leading Green politicians, such as foreign minister Annalena Baerbock and economics minister Robert Habeck, are among the staunchest supporters of Israel and the harshest critics of anti-Zionist and pro-Palestine voices,” wrote political scientist Hans Kundnani, an associate fellow at Chatham House, associate fellow at Birmingham University’s Institute for German Studies, and visiting fellow at New York University’s Remarque Institute, in [an article](#) for *Dissent* magazine. “Unlike American conservatives, however, they see their unconditional support for Israel as an expression of anti-Nazism — in other words, as a progressive position.”

Daniel Marwecki observed that the argument of *Staatsräson* “completely won” after Israel’s security was threatened by the Hamas attacks of October 7th. “In the [*German*] media, we didn’t see pictures of Gaza, we didn’t hear Palestinian voices on TV,” he told Mediapart. It was as if, he said, “we don’t want too much reality interfering with our very German debates. Germany has a very solid one-sided view, a very one-sided empathy, one-sided solidarity.”

But Marwecki also believes the situation is beginning to change, with a realisation among some German politicians that the country’s position is [undermining its credibility abroad](#) by appearing to lend unconditional support to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “Publicly, the position remains the same, but behind closed doors, it’s a mess,” said Marwecki. “At the foreign affairs ministry or within the Green party, there’s a lot of debate.”

Mathieu Magnaudeix

P.S.

• Mediapart. 14 April 2024 à 19h26:
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