

BDS Suppression Attempts in Germany Backfire



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German organizations are among the last Palestine solidarity groups in Europe to have embraced the call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), launched in 2005. Pro-Israel German groups have been quick to respond with aggressive rhetoric equating a BDS-favorable stance with Nazism. The vilification of the movement has had the unintended consequence of inserting BDS into German politics, both at federal and local levels. Select case studies show that the BDS debate in Germany has developed somewhat differently than in other European countries, and that religious discourse is significant in shaping attitudes to Israel and Palestine. While the Palestine solidarity movement tends to single out the “Anti-Germans”—a pro-Israel formation that grew out of the Left after the reunification of Germany—as the major culprit, it is in fact conservative Christian, mostly Evangelical, organizations that are largely responsible for discouraging BDS activism.

I GAVE MY FIRST TALK in Berlin in 2006, when the recently published call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) was a hot topic in the Palestine solidarity movement. The organizers, however, asked me to not to mention boycotts since it was “a sensitive topic” in Germany. I then proceeded to tell my audience that while I would not be discussing BDS, they should know that Germany was at the bottom of the list of European countries with a vibrant BDS movement. I was astonished that progressive Germans considered it an honor to be considered hesitant in expressing solidarity with the Palestinian plight—their lack of solidarity being a sacrifice they had to embrace in order to redeem German guilt over the Holocaust.

Be that as it may, the movement in support of BDS has grown quite quickly in Germany, and today the country boasts a BDS chapter in every major city.¹ German BDS activism is discussed on the news, mentioned at party conventions, and debated at student council meetings and by religious congregations. Still, for the majority of people, the BDS debate has not progressed beyond the first reflexive association that Germans have with the Nazi slogan *Kauft nicht bei Juden!* (Don’t buy from Jews!).² How is boycotting Israel not anti-Semitic, they ask? And they rapidly follow up by saying that in Germany it is impossible, and just too sensitive, to talk about such things, regardless of the arguments in favor of BDS.

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The Anti-Semitism Argument

Historically speaking, the conflation of protest against Israeli policies, or anti-Zionism, with anti-Semitism has ebbed and flowed in Germany. The Baader-Meinhof group, aka the Red Army Faction, considered a left-oriented terrorist group that supported militant Palestinian organizations, has engraved itself in the narrative of the German left wing as a mistake, a derailment, so to speak. Among the demands of the Black September Organization, which attacked the Israeli delegation at the 1972 Munich Olympics, was the release of the leaders of the Red Army Faction from prison.³

Across the political spectrum from the Left to the Right, nearly all German political parties have a strong pro-Israel bias that is couched in terms of “Germany’s historical responsibility” following the Holocaust.⁴ Thus, the State of Israel has become a fetish to assuage Holocaust-related guilt and responsibility.⁵ Former German ambassador to Israel Rudolf Dreßler, who belongs to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), wrote in 2005 that “the security of Israel is Germany’s reason of state” (*staatsräson*).⁶ The term, which does not belong in a democratic lexicon and has no legal standing in Germany, nevertheless carries a great deal of political and symbolic significance in its ability to silence critical voices demanding government accountability for Germany’s support of Israeli atrocities against Palestinians. In 2008, Chancellor Angela Merkel, who heads the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), also invoked *staatsräson* in her address to the Knesset in order to justify sales of German nuclear-capable submarines to the Israeli navy.⁷ The term was used yet again by SPD candidate for the chancellorship Martin Schulz in a 2017 debate, where he said that Palestinian immigrants and other refugees would have to accept Germany’s pro-Israel stance in order to be accepted as Germans.⁸

The German government’s stance, rather than being expressed as responsibility toward the Jewish people, manifests as support for the State of Israel—something that is deeply embedded in Germany’s religious culture. The word “Israel” occurs frequently in German church worship, and even though the reference is obviously to the biblical notion of the Land of Israel and the biblical Jews, it carries over to contemporary political reality. Hence, the description of the establishment of the State of Israel as proof of God’s loyalty to the Jews after the Holocaust, a statement published by the German Evangelical Church in Rhineland in 1980.⁹ German pastors often describe Germany’s strong diplomatic and trade ties with Israel as a form of “reconciliation” and as absolution for the crimes committed by the Nazis.

Extensive research by psychologist and peace researcher Wilhelm Kempf has found that Germans who are committed to the struggle against racism and discrimination directed at Jews (anti-Semitism) are also more likely to hold pro-Palestinian views as part of their human rights outlook.¹⁰ A recent CNN poll revealed that while racist views are commonplace in Europe, anti-Semitism is viewed as the least “legitimate form” of racism: 10 percent of participants admitted to holding unfavorable views of Jews, compared to 16 percent who expressed similar views toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people; 36 percent toward immigrants; 37 percent toward Muslims; and 39 percent toward the Romani.¹¹

In right-wing circles, however, there is a failure to distinguish between Jews and the State of Israel. As a result, those who subscribe to right-wing views often regard German Jews as “agents” of the State of Israel, without acknowledging—indeed, maybe even realizing—how profoundly

anti-Semitic such a position is. To resolve the dissonance, right-wing newspapers such as *Die Welt* and *Bild* have published several stories on attacks against Jews in Germany, repeating the claim that Germany is no longer a safe place for Jews and subtly hinting that Jews should perhaps immigrate to Israel.¹²

Reactions to the BDS Movement

The rise of the BDS movement in Germany coincided with the proliferation of social media and citizen journalism, both of which have contributed significantly to raising awareness about the brutality of the Israeli occupation in Palestine well beyond anything that mainstream German newspapers and television channels provided. As a grassroots movement, BDS is attractive to young Germans who are frustrated with the government's rigid stance on supporting the State of Israel regardless of Israeli violations of international law. As a global movement that has pursued campaigns in many languages and cultures, BDS has also clearly attracted a more internationally aware and multicultural crowd in Germany. It should be noted that those who call for censoring and silencing pro-BDS speakers at public events rely almost exclusively on German information sources, and especially the frequently quoted German sociologist Samuel Salzborn, who regards BDS as anti-Semitic.¹³ The only English-language news sources referenced in anti-BDS rhetoric are the *Jerusalem Post* (specifically, the reporting of Berlin correspondent Benjamin Weinthal) and the right-wing Simon Wiesenthal Center in the United States.¹⁴

Additionally, neo-Nazi groups posing as Jewish activists occasionally spread seemingly pro-BDS pamphlets using hateful and racist language to make it seem like BDS activists are self-hating and anti-Semitic Jews.¹⁵ For their part, some Muslim Germans reject BDS because of its so-called Western values emphasizing human rights and international law. During the 2014 Israeli assault on Gaza, for example, German Muslims of Turkish descent organized demonstrations that did not stress solidarity with Palestinians but rather expressed hatred of the State of Israel and Jews without distinction. Arguably, those demonstrations were a direct reaction to the German government's patronizing attitude toward its Muslim population, whom it admonishes to "integrate" into German society and to embrace a pro-Israel stance as part of an imposed German identity. Such anti-Semitic demonstrations embarrassed the Palestine solidarity movement and weakened it because the German media made no distinction between the different forms of protests against the Israeli attack, tarring the entire movement with the brush of violence and racism.¹⁶

Palestine solidarity groups in Germany, and especially the well-known pro-BDS group Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East, have over time all signed onto the BDS platform. German newspapers and radio stations started to pay attention when BDS was embraced by major Christian organizations such as Pax Christi, which adopted a call in 2013 to label products from illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank. This prompted a massive backlash with Pax Christi being denounced as anti-Semitic. The decision, which was merely a call for a proper labeling of goods, was framed as full-blown support for the BDS movement.¹⁷ This was a crucial moment for Palestine solidarity groups as they began to understand that pro-Israel organizations do not bother with nuance and will vilify organizations that fully support BDS just as much as those that call only for a boycott of settlement goods or even just for the labeling of such goods.

After Omar Barghouti, a founder of the BDS movement and one of its most well-known figures, was invited to Germany on speaking tours—during which he met with representatives from political parties, church groups, unions, and other civil society groups—the number of organizations endorsing BDS skyrocketed.

Still, BDS-focused events remain relatively rare in Germany. There have been several conferences and workshops on the topic, either organized by the Palestinian community in Germany or by progressive pastors from the Evangelical Church. I am aware of only two university-based events dedicated to BDS, both organized by Israeli Jewish students, and one of them, at the University of Gießen, was banned by the faculty.¹⁸ The fact that student groups affiliated with the Israeli lobby have been promoting student council motions to prohibit BDS-related events at universities is an indication that the Israeli lobby anticipates a wave of such events in the near future.

In contrast, there are many events throughout Germany organized around issues related to the Israeli occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid. Events focusing on international law, on testimonies from Gaza, on the media coverage of Israel/Palestine, and so on almost always include a debate about the effectiveness of boycotts, even if the speakers do not mention the BDS movement as such.

Censorship and Repression

The stereotypes about German society being stringently law abiding notwithstanding, there is a clear gap between, on the one hand: the laws governing freedom of speech, enshrined in Article 5 of the German constitution,¹⁹ the EU position regarding freedom of opinion on BDS,²⁰ and the legal opinion of nearly two hundred legal scholars on the right to boycott;²¹ and on the other: the practice of “forbidding BDS” by appealing to sources of authority that are not enshrined in German law. By this I mean the decision of German political parties to regard pro-BDS speech or actions as anti-Semitic and the analogous decisions of student councils to ban BDS events by student groups, among other examples.²²

In some cases, venues have canceled events despite having signed a contract, or they have canceled events at such short notice that it has been difficult if not impossible for organizers to find an alternative space, resulting in wasted resources on advertisement, travel for speakers, and so forth. Lawsuits initiated against such venues have almost always been successful.²³ The pattern whereby politically neutral venues buckle to pressure from pro-Israel organizations, cancel an event, and then lose in court indicates that many such venues fail to inform themselves about the right to freedom of speech under German law, as well as the actual substance of the BDS campaign, before acting.

Another tactic of the pro-Israel lobby is to pressure banks to close the accounts of BDS activists on the grounds that BDS is anti-Semitic. This tactic backfired, however, when Weinthal pressured the Bank for Social Economy to close the account of the Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East in 2016. Weinthal’s action sparked a nationwide firestorm, and several of the bank’s customers went on to close their own accounts in protest, reminding the bank that it was the first time since the Holocaust that a German bank tried to close Jewish-held accounts for political reasons. The bank eventually relented and reopened the BDS activists’ account, publishing a joint statement with Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East, in which the

solidarity organization reiterated its support for BDS, and thereby created a precedent for legitimate support of the movement.²⁴

Palestine solidarity activists have created a database of events canceled or harmed by censorship (not just BDS, but any Palestine solidarity-related event). The database is not comprehensive, however, as it relies on the voluntary sharing of information, and activists who fail to anticipate opposition to such events and do not prepare adequately for it often feel too embarrassed to report an event's cancellation. The list is therefore structurally biased toward underrepresentation. It covers the period 2009–2018, but underreporting is particularly present in the earlier years. As of 1 December 2018, the database included ninety-seven events that had been cancelled throughout Germany, many of them in Munich where the pro-Israel lobby is especially strong.²⁵ Interestingly, the database records twenty-five such cases in 2017 but only thirteen in 2018, although the data is too limited to draw statistically significant conclusions.²⁶

The Israeli Lobby

Recently, Al Jazeera produced a four-part documentary titled *The Lobby* about the practices of the Israeli lobby in the UK and the United States. However, the program never aired because the Qatari authorities reportedly came under external pressure.²⁷ That kind of controversy is unlikely to occur in Germany, where foreign intervention in local politics is neither illegal nor particularly frowned upon. Hence the free operation in Germany of such organizations as the German-based Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs, which promotes political activity in support of Turkish government policies and receives funding from both Ankara and the German interior ministry.²⁸

In Germany, pro-Israel organizations are pursuing several political campaigns to smear Palestine solidarity activists. The online magazine *haGalil* regularly accuses Palestine solidarity activists of anti-Semitism,²⁹ and student groups under the umbrella of the “Young Forum of the German-Israeli Society” launch campaigns to censor BDS on campuses and to cancel events and lectures by Palestinians or by leftist Israelis. It is important to stress, however, that the Israeli lobby in Germany remains small, is not heavily funded, and not capable of influencing public opinion on its own. It relies on the cooperation of local actors, especially German institutions with the ability to suppress events promoting BDS and other forms of Palestinian solidarity. A quick review of three such groups is in order: pro-Israeli German politicians, the organization known as “Anti-Germans,” and the Evangelical Church of Germany.

Pro-Israeli politicians can be found in nearly every German political party. Right-wing politicians, especially from the new far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD), use pro-Israel language in order to defend themselves from accusations of harboring neo-Nazi members.³⁰ At the other end of the spectrum, Volker Beck of the Green Party served as the chairman of the Germany-Israel Parliamentary Friendship Group in the German parliament, and has continued to publish frequent attacks on Palestine solidarity activists even after losing his parliamentary seat.³¹ Germany's largest political group, the CDU, passed a resolution in January 2018 condemning the BDS movement as anti-Semitic.³² On the municipal level, Frankfurt mayor Uwe Becker has expressed support for illegal Israeli colonization of the West Bank (particularly the Jordan Valley)

and has attempted to block events from being held in the city that criticize the occupation.³³ Munich has become a hotspot of pro-Israeli politics since its municipality passed a resolution banning BDS-related events in city-owned venues.³⁴ It would be a mistake to consider pro-Israeli German politicians to be a source of support for the Israeli lobby because in Germany's case, that would be mixing cause with effect. These politicians have been elected on a conservative agenda, an integral part of which is unconditional support for Israeli policies; and their pro-Israeli politics is one way to attract support from other German groups with the money and votes they need.

The influence of the Israeli lobby on German politics reached a peak in May 2019 as a resolution was rushed through parliament following the conclusion of the fifth German Israel Congress that took place in Frankfurt in November 2018. Both the far-right AfD and Free Democratic Party as well as the Left Party submitted proposals to condemn the BDS movement as anti-Semitic, and a non-binding resolution to that effect was passed with lightning speed, despite a last-minute petition by hundreds of Jewish and Israeli scholars not to equate BDS with anti-Semitism. Notwithstanding its non-binding nature, the measure marks a major victory for Germany's Israeli lobby: it simplifies the work of unequivocally pro-Israel politicians to merely opposing BDS.³⁵

The second group of pro-Israel activists is known as the "Anti-Germans." Defining itself as part of the German left wing, the Anti-Germans are strongly opposed to nationalism, and especially German nationalism, in the name of universal leftist values, but they make an exception in their support for U.S. and Israeli nationalism. The Anti-Germans are a unique German phenomenon without parallels in any other left-oriented movement in the world. They are associated with the anti-Fascist movement (Antifa) and call for an uncompromising war against all remnants of Nazi Germany. As they see it, the United States must be lauded for its role in fighting the Nazis in World War II, and the State of Israel is a Jewish collective whose military is nothing other than the next incarnation of partisans and ghetto fighters. The Anti-Germans lend great significance to the historical figure of the mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, for his anti-Jewish statements and his meeting with Adolf Hitler in 1941. Many Anti-Germans have therefore developed a highly racist perspective, according to which all Jews are inherently victims of Fascism—and the existence of right-wing Jews cannot be taken seriously—and all Palestinians are inherently anti-Semitic terrorists.³⁶ Despite identifying as leftists, Anti-Germans consider the "anti-capitalist" movements (such as Occupy Wall Street, the anti-globalization movement, the "99 Percent," and so forth) inherently anti-Semitic, because they fail to distinguish—or believe that anti-capitalist leftists fail to distinguish—between Jews and global capital.³⁷ Anti-Germans therefore bring Israeli flags to demonstrations and organize protests against Palestine solidarity events. In their publication *Jungle World*, they denounce Palestine solidarity activists as anti-Semites and routinely interview Israeli military officers.³⁸

Palestine solidarity activists across Germany regularly cite the Anti-Germans as being the opposition forces and the power behind the censorship or banning of BDS events. While the group features prominently among pro-Israeli voices in the country, it remains small, numerically speaking, because of its peculiar politics, forming a significant part of the German left wing only in the city of Leipzig. Most Anti-Germans are very young (under twenty-five) and eventually get disenchanted with the group due to its internal moral contradictions and its incompatibility with

leftist groups from any other country.³⁹ The existence of Anti-Germans cannot in and of itself explain the support that the pro-Israel lobby finds in German society.

The third and possibly most important group in this discussion is the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), which is the country's largest religious organization, with strong ties to numerous civil society formations and state institutions. The church is itself divided between more progressive- and more conservative-leaning tendencies, and it is highly involved in many debates within the German political sphere, ranging from the question of refugees and arms exports to countries that violate human rights, to issues of personal freedoms, and more. The liturgy and hymns in these Evangelical churches include frequent mentions of "Israel" in the sense of the biblical Holy Land or "the Israelites," and for many Germans whose church attendance started at a very young age, it has been difficult to distinguish between biblical Israel, the Jewish people, and the modern State of Israel.⁴⁰ In Berlin, in 2017, the EKD banned an event commemorating fifty years of Israeli occupation.⁴¹

The close relations between the Evangelical Christian and Zionist movements have been extensively documented.⁴² British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour, who issued the fateful letter calling for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" in 1917, was deeply motivated by religious reasons, perceiving the Zionist colonization of Palestine to be part of a heavenly design.⁴³ U.S.-based far-right Christian groups support Israeli settlement of the West Bank and extreme right-wing groups in Israel (such as Im Tirtzu, a neo-fascist formation) on the purportedly theological premise that these accelerate the coming of Armageddon and the end times.⁴⁴ Although German churches are generally loath to utter statements to the effect that Hitler was fulfilling God's will for Israel—a pronouncement made by the controversial leader of Christians United for Israel, Rev. John Hagee⁴⁵—there is a clear tendency among the German clergy to depict all Jews as representatives of the State of Israel, and by extension, portray any resistance to Israeli policy, such as BDS, as a form of anti-Semitism. In 2018, the German journal of evangelical ethics, *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik*, published a defamatory article attacking an anthology of papers about the liberation of Palestine, in which theology professor and author Hermann Lührs called the editor of the anthology an anti-Semite. Although Lührs's own article did not meet the standards of an academic paper,⁴⁶ the academic journal's decision to publish it was tantamount to a political statement—namely that theology should determine the attitude of Germans toward Israel/Palestine based on the premise that there is no distinction between biblical Israel and the modern State of Israel.

Deploying the Anti-Semitism Trope Has Lost Its Effectiveness

When considering that the purpose of BDS is not to cut all of Israel's economic ties to the world but to spread information and provoke debates about Israel's racist policies toward Palestinians, one might conclude that BDS has made impressive gains in Germany, managing to influence the debate about Israel/Palestine not only among Palestine solidarity activists but also among members of labor unions, churches, academic institutions, and political parties.

Although not all protest against Israeli aggression in Germany is part of a progressive pro-Palestine platform, the BDS movement has succeeded in maintaining a clear and consistent agenda based on

international law that sidesteps racialized traps. Pro-Israel forces, however, are neither as unified nor as clear in their messages. Such groups agree on two things, basically: first, that their activism should focus on countering the BDS campaign; and second, that the most useful argument to discredit Palestine solidarity activists is the charge of anti-Semitism. Other than that, the pro-Israel groups deploy a mix of incompatible political perspectives ranging from right-wing Islamophobia and left-wing denunciation of German nationalism, on the one hand, to a theological depiction of Israel as a holy state, and self-serving cynicism that regards Israel as a good customer of German arms and a representative of “European interests” in the Middle East, on the other.

The common use of the anti-Semitism trope has lost much of its effectiveness in giving pause to German activists. It does, however, take a heavy toll on Germany’s Jews: it strips them of their subjectivity, as they are increasingly perceived as nothing more than agents of the State of Israel, and equates every critique of Israeli policy with some kind of conspiracy against German Jews. It is not surprising, therefore, that Jewish activists are present at every BDS activity in Germany and that many German Jews argue that BDS is also a platform for their own liberation.

About the Author

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