

## **Armin Langer: Fighting Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Germany**

**Article by Armin Langer**

November 15, 2023

Hamas's terrorist attack on 7 October and Israel's retaliation in Gaza led to a wave of antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe. In Germany, several pro-Palestinian demonstrations have been banned, while, according to media reports, Jewish members of society are contemplating leaving the country. We spoke with Armin Langer, Assistant Professor of European Studies at the University of Florida and ordained rabbi, about the freedom to protest, the nature of stereotypes, and the best ways to address them.

**Green European Journal: Following the Hamas attack on Israeli civilians and Israel's retaliation in Gaza, the public discussion seems to have turned more Islamophobic in Europe. In Germany, for example, Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke out in favour of more and faster deportations of migrants, while the tabloid *Bild* published a "manifesto" that is a collection of stereotypes about Muslims living in the country. Where do these feelings come from?**

**Armin Langer:** This is not new at all. There has been a general debate on migration for some time now, which precedes the current conflict in Israel and Gaza. Friedrich Merz, leader of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union, for example, has been demanding more deportations and a more restrictive immigration policy for a long time now. Not to mention the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which has been spreading anti-immigrant sentiments for years.

In addition to this already existing debate, a new element came into the conversation: following the attacks on 7 October, politicians are demanding immigrants express solidarity with Israel or threatening them with the withholding of their German naturalisation process if they do not acknowledge Israel's right to existence. These conversations on the immigrants' alleged lack of support for Israel and endorsement of terrorism make the German case special in Europe, or even the world, as they make a group of people's right to become citizens conditional on their opinions about Israel.

**In Germany, the security of Israel is seen as a so-called "Staatsräson" ("reason of state"), meaning that the country's foreign policy needs to be supportive of Israel and in case its existence is at stake; antisemitic statements are considered unconstitutional. Can that be a justification for stricter action against anti-Israeli statements?**

The German *Strafgesetzbuch* ("Criminal Code") demands action against antisemitism, but it also demands action against all sorts of racism and discrimination – in the language of the Criminal Code, every "incitement to hatred" is to be penalised. However, from what I can see now, this principle is being applied to antisemitism, but not to other forms of racism – definitely not to anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia. On the contrary, many of those people who are attacking the Arab and Muslim communities for allegedly promoting antisemitic ideologies are themselves perpetuating Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism, just by putting all these populations under the suspicion of being antisemitic. The justification for that is often just their Arab heritage or their Muslim identity.

We can see that, for instance, in the ban of various peaceful pro-Palestinian rallies in Berlin, Munich, and

many other German cities. The argument is usually that these rallies and demonstrations will lead to antisemitic statements. Obviously, antisemitic statements are not to be tolerated, but the assumption that the decision of a bunch of Palestinians, Germans of Palestinian descent, and their allies to gather in public will automatically lead to antisemitism is very problematic. It treats them as a homogeneous group whose members have no free will and no opinion of their own. It cannot be legal – and it is definitely not morally justifiable – to prohibit demonstrations before they even happen, just based on some unproven assumptions. If individual demonstrators make antisemitic statements during a rally, they must be sanctioned, but not the whole rally. In fact, we have seen in the case of those demonstrations that were in the end permitted that authorities did not document an overwhelming number of antisemitic statements.

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Germany is home to both one of the largest Palestinian diasporas and one of the largest Israeli diasporas in the world. These two communities often coexist in the same urban spaces, such as in Berlin Neukölln. Limiting Palestinian visibility benefits only white Germans because it serves to alleviate the guilt they feel for the Shoah. By downplaying the Palestinian community's struggles and diverting attention from questions about Palestinian rights, white Germans try to position themselves on the right side of history in the ongoing Gaza war, which they wrongly perceive as parallel to the historical injustices committed by their grandparents' generation during the Holocaust. This shift in focus provides them with a psychological buffer against feelings of guilt and responsibility. This German coping mechanism, of course, does not benefit the Palestinian cause, but it also does not benefit all of Israel. In fact, in Israel itself we see numerous rallies in support of peace talks and ceasefire; there are even calls for talks with Hamas, so that the kidnapped Israeli civilians can return to their homes.

### **So, pro-Palestinian demonstrations are not signs of support for one combating party over the other?**

As we are talking, there are still attacks going on. More than 11,000 Palestinians were killed since the war began, and around 1200 Israeli civilians were murdered. In this context, banning demonstrations which call for a ceasefire or are explicitly pro-Palestinian should not take place in a country which identifies as a democracy.

At the same time, pro-Israeli demonstrations are not just tolerated but actually encouraged: on 22 October there was a major pro-Israel rally in Berlin where Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the President of the Federal Republic, gave a speech, and thousands of Germans gathered to express their support for Israel. I commend them for expressing support for the Israeli civilians who suffered from the terrorist attacks, but I wish these same people would also express their empathy with the Palestinian civilians who lost their lives and who are suffering under the attacks right now. Palestinian civilian lives are not worth less than Israeli civilian lives. Yet I do not see many voices for expressing empathy for all the civilian victims of the conflict. The German political and cultural elite is especially one-sided when it comes to this conflict.

**There are reports about a significant increase in hate crimes against Jews in Germany. How would you explain this?**

There were lots of criminal offences, but I am not aware of any attempted or actual physical attacks, apart from the attempt of throwing Molotov cocktails at a Synagogue in Berlin – but [as of 7 November] we do not know yet who the perpetrators were. It could have been Palestinians, but also white Germans. We saw that French authorities linked a number of antisemitic graffiti in Paris to Russian networks that were attempting to exploit the crisis to sow confusion in western Europe. Of course, even without alleged Russian interference, it is clear that there is significant antisemitism in Germany – but this is nothing new. In years when there is an escalation between Israel and the Palestinian territories, there is also an increase in antisemitic attacks. That has been the pattern for two decades now. The statistical data shows that in the following years, the numbers tend to go down. This trend also shows that many people do not understand the difference between Jews in Germany and the state of Israel. Obviously, a synagogue in Berlin is not responsible for the war on Gaza. This misinformation needs to be actively tackled.

**You used to live in a Berlin district known for its significant Arab and Muslim population, your autobiographical book is titled *A Jew in Neukölln*, and you are a founder of the Salaam-Shalom Initiative, a group that brought together Jews and Muslims. You probably experienced different attitudes inside the Muslim communities, both positive and negative. Did you encounter strong stereotypes, or did you ever have problems related to your Jewish background when you were talking to Muslims in Germany?**

I lived for many years on the *Sonnenallee*, also known as the “Arab street” these days, as it is home to a significant Palestinian community and after 2015, it became a cultural hub for the Syrian community in Berlin. I never encountered any antisemitic comments there. I regularly visited mosques as a representative of the Salaam-Shalom Initiative, I went to public schools with a very high percentage of kids from Muslim and immigrant families and the reactions were overwhelmingly positive. I mostly encountered curiosity, as most folks had not met any Jews before me.

But this is true for non-Muslim Germans as well: there are not many Jews around, especially because of Germany’s history. That is exactly why dialogue projects are important. The best way to tackle stereotypes is through personal contact. It does not always work, but it is still the best way to challenge them. Especially in times like these, it would be important to support projects that bring together people from various ethnic and religious identities, so they understand that they have a lot in common. Not just culturally speaking, but also when it comes to issues like housing, economic challenges, and a lot of other everyday issues.

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Jewish and Muslim lives alike are affected by the populist discourse on migration, although to a different extent. I believe that alliances between these minorities can make it clear that Germany needs immigration, given the country’s shrinking native-born population. Without immigration, Germans could not uphold their standards of living, as fewer immigrants mean less productivity and less income for the state. This is true for every other western European nation as well. The current debate demonising

immigrants as antisemites totally ignores the rationales behind immigration and plays with emotions, instead of trying to make intellectual arguments and finding common ground.

**Have you spoken with members of the Jewish community in Germany since early October?**

There are now conversations in public and headlines in newspapers about Jews having to leave Germany because it is not safe for them anymore. But this is not the case. Germany is the only country, apart from Israel, where the population of Jews is constantly growing. Berlin in particular attracts Jewish immigrants from Israel, from the United Kingdom, from the United States, and will probably continue to do so.

Every single Jew in Berlin I talked to in the past weeks expressed some kind of insecurity, but no one was considering leaving. The reason for this fixation on Jewish fear is just offering non-Jewish Germans an opportunity to position themselves as saviours of Jews. That is why the weekly *Der Spiegel* would have the faces of German Jews on its cover, accompanied by the text “We are afraid”. This whole situation is seen by many Germans as an opportunity to make good for what their society did eighty years ago. This is a misguided approach. There is no connection whatsoever between the Holocaust and the current war. Jews might be victims in both cases, but the two situations are not comparable. Today, Israel is one of the strongest military powers in the Middle East, while during the Holocaust, the Jewish community was almost completely defenceless.

**As a sociologist, how would you define antisemitism as it manifests in Germany today? Does it refer to stereotypes about a community or racism towards one group? Is it hatred combined with some kind of ideology or conspirational thinking? Is it an irrational resentment that is passed on from one generation to the other?**

I think it means all of the above. Anti-Jewish sentiments can manifest in stereotypes or prejudices but also in conspiracy theories. It is also important to highlight that very often the antisemitic tropes are not explicit; instead, they build implicitly on age-old stereotypes about the Jews. For instance, there are the infamous conspiracy theories surrounding George Soros. These are based on the trope of the rich, powerful, and greedy Jew, who has a secret mischievous plan to transform the world. Those who spread these theories often do not even have to name the Jews. It is enough for them to use code words and leitmotifs; people will understand because antisemitism has been embedded in European culture for so long – it was the norm in Europe for almost 2000 years.

Of course, it is not the norm anymore, but because of its long history, as well as its embeddedness and deep roots in culture, it is still very much around. That is also why I find so absurd the current German political discussions, according to which antisemitism is a new phenomenon imported by immigrants. In fact, statistics tell us that the overwhelming majority of antisemitic hate crimes, including physical violence, are still committed by white Germans. And yet, in recent weeks, German media and politicians have almost exclusively focused on antisemitism among Muslims and immigrant groups. That is a further attempt at demonising these groups and at shifting the discussion to the antisemitism of the other.

**But besides this homegrown, white supremacist attitude, there is also another kind of antisemitism that is relatively new in Europe.**

Why would it be another kind of antisemitism? Whether it comes from an Arab, a Muslim or a white German, antisemitism is not something fundamentally different. If we honestly want to challenge antisemitism, we have to treat it as a phenomenon which affects all segments of society.

**Yes, but while antisemitism in Europe is based on age-old stereotypes and conspiracy theories, among Muslim communities it is mostly related to the misguided identification between the policies of the Israeli state (and the grievances they cause to Palestinians) and the Jewish community at large. In this sense, it might require different responses.**

I do not think that those grievances justify antisemitism, but I also do not think that disproving conspiracies with rational arguments is sufficient to dispel them. The ideas that Jews control the media and Soros controls the world are completely baseless, but still, there are plenty of Germans who believe them. And even the references to Israel are not specific to antisemitism among Muslims – they also come up in discussions between white Germans. For example, we can often hear the argument that Israel is doing to the Palestinians what the Nazis did to the Jews. This argument is obviously false, and can serve as another tool to make white Germans feel better about themselves. We have to tackle all different forms and manifestations of antisemitism simultaneously; education and personal connections could be very helpful here, especially when anti-Jewish feelings originate in the confusion between Jewry and the State of Israel.

**The criticism that the European left receives these days is similar: it does not seem to see the difference between Palestinian civilians who are suffering under the current war, and Hamas, the terrorist group that killed around 1200 Israelis and kidnapped 240 on 7 October. How can this confusion be overcome?**

This should not be too complicated. You can criticise a government and at the same time express solidarity with its people. In the same vein, condemning the terrorist organisation Hamas does not mean that you cannot express solidarity with Palestinians who are suffering or dying in the current conflict, just like Israeli civilians. We have to keep in mind that 70 per cent of Gazans want the Palestinian Authority to take over Gaza from Hamas, and half of Gazans want Hamas to acknowledge Israel based on the 1967 borders. Of course, there are Gazans who support Hamas, but we should not forget about the difficult circumstances in which these people have to live due to the blockades by Israel and Egypt. That explains, at least in part, why their desperate situation will make them look for extreme solutions, even if it does not justify terrorism.

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At the same time, as I mentioned before, a majority of Gazans do not support Hamas and are still suffering under Israel's current retaliatory actions; therefore, calling for a ceasefire cannot be equated with a pro-Hamas stance. In fact, we can see that the protestors themselves are not speaking out in favour of Hamas. Not so long ago, we had a pro-Palestinian rally on my campus in Gainesville, Florida, where hundreds of students showed up, as well as a number of people from the city. One of the participants tried to chant something in favour of Hamas, and the people immediately excluded him, so he decided to leave. I think that also shows that there is a wide array of political opinions and ideological standpoints in the Palestinian community and their allies, and that is something that should be reflected in the wider discussion.

**You live in the US now. Do you have the impression that American society deals with the conflict – and the antisemitism and Islamophobia that accompany it – differently from Europe, and Germany in particular?**

The US has a strong First Amendment protection for freedom of speech. While the US government follows an unconditionally pro-Israel political agenda, it does not censor pro-Palestinian demonstrations as the German authorities did. The president of my university, former Republican Senator Ben Sasse, has made his pro-Israel stances pretty clear but also emphasised that students can hold pro-Israel or anti-Israel positions as the university will defend free speech.

Beyond Gainesville, American cities have hosted a number of rallies calling for a ceasefire, led by Palestinian Americans and their allies, including a significant number of Jewish Americans. The Biden administration has also recognised that the current war in Gaza has led to an increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic hate crimes, and has called for action against both forms of hatred.

### **How could progressive or left-wing movements constructively help Israelis and Palestinians?**

They should elevate the voices of those activist groups and movements that are trying to contribute to peace and reconciliation in Israel and the Palestinian territories. They should express solidarity with civilian victims, whether Israeli or Palestinian, or of any other nationality.

Israel and the Palestinian territories are home to a number of NGOs that need our support. Some of these groups are focusing on providing legal aid to Palestinians in Israel and in their territories, others are at the forefront of providing humanitarian aid right now in Gaza. Beyond these NGOs, there are many groups in Israel and Palestine that facilitate conversations between Israelis and Palestinians, or support victims' families on both sides. There are groups which bring together parents who lost their children because of the conflict. There are artistic projects like theatres or photography collectives with an emphasis on collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians. These groups need the support of European progressives because there is no other way out of this bloodshed than looking for avenues towards a just peace.



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Published November 15, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/armin-langer-fighting-antisemitism-and-islamophobia-in-germany/>

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