

The Moral Imagination Crisis in Germany's Approach to Palestine

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Palestinians wait for food to be distributed in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip Photo: Mohammed Talatene / dpa

There has always been a strange unspoken pact between Germany and the Arab world. The Arabs were less outraged by German support for Israel than by that of the US and UK. This was in part due to the widespread view that Germany could not do otherwise because of its historical guilt. Arab governments and their publics not only reluctantly let Germany off the hook but also bought into a set of historical perks. Germany could claim that it had never colonized Arab countries. Germany's dark past skirted around the Arab world apart from the Axis invasion of North Africa in the Second World War which was short-lived and saw fewer war crimes that paled in comparison to the horrors that unfolded in Europe. And if you were later unhappy with West Germany, there was always East Germany (GDR). You could like the Germany of your choice.

Admiration remained the case in a reunified Germany too. The fact that Berlin opposed participation in the Iraq war in 2003 was well received. The sight of Syrian refugees being welcomed at German train stations in 2015 warmed the Arab public to Germany even more, as they saw the contrast to the mistreatment of Syrians by their own governments. From Rabat to Baghdad, Germany was seen through its Mercedes cars clogging the streets of Kuwait, through the Goethe Institute sticking out among the trees of Alexandria, or through friendly backpackers hiking in the Lebanese mountains. Berlin's soft power trickled down to the Arab airport officer giving less scrutiny to the inbound German passport holder. German-Arab problems existed of course, but they were addressed on a country-by-country basis and often resolved. The rise of the far right, which frightened the Arab diaspora in Germany, was barely noticed in Arab countries. The diaspora, immersed in the difficult-lived realities of Germany, were at odds with their country of origin and its glamorization of Germany.

Then the horrific Hamas massacres and kidnappings took place on October 7, and Israel responded by bombing the Gaza Strip, starving its inhabitants, killing thousands of civilians, and displacing almost two million people. It quickly became clear that this war went far beyond self-defense. Germany lost every nuance with its one-sided support for Israel, trivializing the gruesome reality in Gaza and unwilling to demonstrate basic human empathy for the Palestinians. When the German Foreign Ministry is not praising Israel's "humanitarian" measures, it [refers](#) to a catastrophic event with thousands of Palestinian children killed as "the situation in the Middle East." As if it were nothing more than a Deutsche Bahn delay.

The murders and kidnappings carried out by Hamas on October 7 are reprehensible and unjustifiable. Compassion for the Israeli victims should not be conditional or dismissed because of the history of Palestinian suffering. At the same time, we must make it clear that talking about context is not tantamount to justification. Hamas is first and foremost a product of the occupation; its ideology is fueled by the displacement, dispossession, and violence that Palestinians have experienced daily since 1948. If Hamas is destroyed, something else will take its place as long as there is no just peace.

Hamas recruits many of its members from among orphans who have seen their parents murdered by Israel. The Palestinian Marxist militants from the Black September Organization, who carried out the terrorist massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, were orphans of previous Israeli wars. Now Israel is creating a new generation of orphans. Palestinians are dying by the thousands and the scenario of the destruction of the entire Gaza Strip with a forced mass expulsion, a second "Nakba", is very real. Renowned experts are alarmed and are speaking of a genocide taking place. Meanwhile, German politics is concerned with discursive trigger points, censoring "Free Palestine" and making the Palestinians pay the price for Europe's bloody past to this day by letting Israel get away with everything concerning its own historical guilt.

German politicians fell over themselves in moral gymnastics to justify a death toll that has been the deranged phenomenon of our time. Berlin turned the lives of seasoned German diplomats and professional cultural workers abroad into a neurotic hell as they were forced to navigate between the German government of the day and the justified concerns of their host countries.

Last month, Germany [cut funding](#) for an anti-trafficking program at the Center for Legal Aid for Egyptian Women because its director, Azza Soliman, opposes Israel's war in Gaza. Soliman was awarded the Franco-German Prize for Human Rights and the Rule of Law in 2020. Hossam Bahgat, head of the Egyptian human rights organization EIPR, severed cooperation on projects with the German government because "Berlin's position on the war raises serious doubts about the space of shared values between Germany and human rights activists, feminists and independent media in Egypt." Across the Arab world, Germany is losing allies who previously saw themselves as part of a community of values committed to human rights.

It has long been clear the liberal order and international law often apply double standards. In the early days of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine when meeting German officials in the Bundestag saw their usual stoicism replaced with a somewhat understandable anxious behavior, it was easy to draw an analogy with occupied Palestine. But the response was nothing but silent stares, a silence that spoke volumes. The double standards were unbearable then and are more unbearable now: Berlin is in favor of sending weapons to resist an illegal occupation while providing military, economic, and moral support to an occupying power that continues to seize land illegally and murder with impunity. At best, Israel is occasionally reminded to comply with international law, but without any consequence.

Now, in the face of Western support for Israeli war crimes in Gaza, the last semblance of universality has been shattered. The autocrats have taken notes and are ready to use current events as a pretext in the future. The Western reaction to the Israeli war in Gaza is an undeserved gift for Putin, and rarely will anyone soon in the Global South listen when Western politicians insist on international law.

When it comes to the Israeli occupation, there is often an alternate reality in Germany that boggles the mind. Many Syrian refugees would correctly say that Bashar al-Assad's bloody regime is the cause of why they left. Nothing controversial there. Yet when it is pointed out that Germany is home to Europe's largest Palestinian refugee population, 100,000, then it should be asked: What caused them to be there if not for the direct or indirect actions of successive Israeli governments? How does that historical reality escape the conversation?

I generally felt that the Arab Spring in 2011 was a welcome change and a breath of fresh air for the German policy establishment. Cities like Tunis and Cairo were beaming with hope and gave Berlin fewer complications compared to Ramallah and Gaza City. But here is the point that many officials missed. The conflict with Israel was feeding the rise of Arab authoritarianism and securitization in the region for decades. It contributed to the destruction of fragile democratic experiments in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq in the 1950s and 1960s, and gave rise to the ruling military classes that expanded their power partly under the pretext of defending Arabs against Israeli aggression. The modern Egyptian Officer's Republic was born in 1952 as an indirect result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that was in part triggered by the establishment of Israel and the new state's expulsion of the indigenous Palestinians.

However, the protest movements of the Arab Spring in 2011 were also inspired by Palestinian popular uprisings, particularly the 2000 Intifada. The current pro-Palestinian protests in the Arab countries are sometimes mixed with other demands, such as an end to the corruption of their governments – which is why the Arab regimes tend not to like to see such protests. In a sense, Palestinian freedom is an antidote to Arab unfreedom. The Palestinian issue is central to Arab public opinion, and it will always shatter illusions that it can be ignored.

Anyone who sits down with German officials can have mostly productive conversations about any Arab country, from human rights to higher education, as they sip on their sparkling water. Yet, when it comes to Israel and Palestine, the moral sensors get suddenly jammed and the script becomes nauseatingly predictable. This reflects a hardening of the boundaries of the culture of remembrance, which has become static in its fixation on Israel, not necessarily the safety of Jews.

It is commendable that Germany is coming to terms with its dark history. The horrors and madness perpetrated by Nazi Germany must be remembered. The world would benefit from more remembrance culture, not less of it. However, there are important criticisms of the development of remembrance culture in Germany. The confrontation with anti-Semitism has become a kind of canonization of Israel that is “immune to historical and evidence-based arguments and blind to the experiences of Palestinians under occupation,” as Israeli historian Alon Confino [puts](#) it. This development has allowed the fight against anti-Semitism to be partly instrumentalized by the right wing. It is highly disturbing when high-ranking German politicians share a video by Piers Morgan with the British right-wing activist and journalist Douglas Murray, in which he claims that Hamas is worse than the Nazis. The trend of relativizing the Nazis to Hamas requires us to pause and ask how the discourse got to this sad point.

The editors of the left-leaning Jewish-American magazine *Jewish Currents* [wrote](#): “The Germans tightly control the shape of Jewishness and Palestinian-ness within their borders... Germany’s stifling embrace of the Jewish community within its borders, with or without the participation of Jews, secures the German self-image as moral arbiter, while shifting the country’s blame to Arabs and Muslims.” Despite genuine Arab-Jewish solidarity efforts, let alone everyday Arab-Jewish intermingling in German cities, the state would prefer to turn Jews and Arabs into heroes and villains, caricatures in the German “theater of memory” - a term coined by the German-Jewish sociologist Y. Michal Bodemann in his critique of the German culture of remembrance. The Federal President’s call for Arabs and Muslims to officially distance themselves from anti-Semitism presupposes that anti-Semitism is a kind of standard attitude among Arabs and Muslims. This problem echoes what Palestinian-German legal scholar Nahed Samour notes in the open-access edited book [Arab Berlin](#) (in which I have a chapter) “The Arab turned German citizen is not granted the chance to act as a self-confident citizen but needs to manage the expectations of ‘the Arab’ facing German society.” This is also not to mention that [84 percent of anti-Semitic attacks](#) in 2022 were by the German right.

But the global narrative is changing – and Germany is falling behind. Recently, Belgian transport workers refused to ship weapons destined for Israel that would most likely kill Palestinian civilians. Fortunately, some parties are learning the right lessons from history. The blockade of ports is just one of many actions directed against the West’s complicity in this war of extermination. Activists, students, trade unions, and ordinary citizens – Jews, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, atheists, and anyone who cares about the survival of our shared humanity – are mobilizing to slow down Israel’s war machine. They are all amalgamating into the world’s anti-genocidal infrastructure. Will they succeed? If I were to take a long-term view, then I would adopt the words of the 19th-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker: “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Shar is the Arabic word for evil in the Islamic faith, but it actually means insufficient or incomplete. To not live up to the responsibilities of a human being is to be less than complete. Sympathy and mercy are just some of the qualities of that responsibility, the absence of which leads to the failure of humans to act as humans. The formula should be simple: Palestinian life is just as sacred as Jewish life; Jewish life is just as sacred as Palestinian life. Believing it, articulating it, and hopefully acting upon it should not be too difficult. Anything else is moral bankruptcy and will drive us all into the abyss.