



If necessary against the majority

About the panel discussion regarding:

"Anti-Semitism, the German Media and the Middle East Conflict"

at the June 26th, 2003, conference in the Paul-Löbe-House, Berlin

by Klaus Faber

translation by Rebekka Schroeder (critical society)

At the June 26th, 2003, conference, 140 guests, a panel of experts and MPs discussed the topic „Anti-semitism, the German media and the Middle East Conflict.“ The meeting took place at the Paul-Löbe-House, a neighbouring building of the home of the German parliament, the Reichstag. The four organizers of the event – *the Moses Mendelssohn Centre for European-Jewish Studies at the University of Potsdam, Wissenschaftsforum der Sozialdemokratie in (the Social Democratic Science Forum of the federal states of) Berlin, Brandenburg und Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, das Kulturforum der Sozialdemokratie (Social Democratic Cultural Forum) and Honestly-Concerned* picked up a current question in the German debate. The American Jewish Committee being a co-sponsor supported the panel discussion. Gert Weisskirchen, the Social Democratic parliamentary group's foreign affairs' speaker, was fundamentally involved in the organization.



Stand of the debate on anti-Semitism

There is no new wave of anti-Semitism in Europe, EU Spokesman Javier Solana declared to US representatives in Washington. With this statement Solana contradicts all establishments in surveys and other studies. The French administration officially acknowledges that increasingly spreading anti-Semitism at schools also raises a problem that compels one to action.

The Simon Wiesenthal Centre indicates again and again in its publications the biggest perceivable anti-Semitic wave currently in Europe since 1945. By now experts tend to believe, that the extent of this new movement surpasses the antisemitic movements at the beginning of the 30s in the last century. Is it based on a lack of political sensitivity that Solana, in difference to others - especially the immediately affected Jewish communities - doesn't see which way the wind is blowing? Is Solana not informed about the numerous publications concerning the growing Arab-Islamic anti-Semitism, as well among the Muslim minorities in Europe? The answer to that question is of importance to the German discussion and also to the conclusions from the debate on the 26th of June, 2003, in Berlin.

Prejudiced statements directed against Israel by EU officials are well-known. Terror attacks and Israeli measures ta-

ken against terror are often put on a common political level. Anti-Jewish propaganda and acts of violence are presumably seen by Solana, as by other EU representatives, as a reaction to the Middle East Conflict - as probably excessive and therefore to be rejected, but at least a reaction to be understood as a result of the oppression of the Palestinians.

That Israel has been made the „Jew“ among the States, as had been formulated by Rabbi Andrew Baker at the panel discussion in Berlin is withdrawn from the critical political perception of Solana and others: that a preconditioned negative judgement is applied on Israel's political standards, that does not apply for any other state; that the demand to wipe out Israel made by Islamic states and groups, or spread by Arabic school books and media, is not clearly enough condemned in word and deed; that political aversions in everyday life are often directed equally against Israel and Jewish institutions.

It is seen in a different way, not because the relevant facts are unknown to them, but because they interpret those facts in a way that allows them to see the issue in relative way or that justifies the portrayed anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish tendencies in society, politics and media.

Solana's and the EU administration's Middle East politics fit accordingly in a

series of positions, that see the obstacles to peace to a larger part in the Israeli occupation and furthermore in the characteristics of the Jewish state, and to a lesser or no extent in the Arab denial of Israel's right to exist or in the Arab anti-Semitism and terror. That this opinion is common among the vast majority in many European countries must be presumed.

German Media and the Middle East Conflict

A similar initial situation exists for the German media and political debate concerning the Arab-Israeli Conflict and the new anti-Semitic movements.

Andrew Baker, representing the American Jewish Committee, Ulrich W. Sahm, a German journalist in Israel, Eldad Beck, an Israeli journalist in Germany, Sacha Stawski, founder of the Internet forum Honestly-Concerned and Rabbi Andreas Nachama, member of the board of trustees of the Moses Mendelssohn Center gave speeches in the first round of the Berlin forum. In an impressive way they have described the problem: the special position of Israel in media and politics and the fluid transitions to anti-Semitism.

The German Public is purposefully misled, explained Ulrich W. Sahm, by biased reporting from news agencies "with seemingly harmless words" - such as descriptions following the pattern of



the "hardliner" Sharon, or the since long disproved formula of "Sharon's provocation on the Temple Mount", as well as with "doubtable mini-statistics" about the Palestinian and Israeli death toll - "towards a hatred of Jews, false compassions and partisanship". For example one german news agency attaches to every report such a sweeping number of the Palestinian and Israeli dead, says Sahn.

But the Israelis did not kill all of the more than 2300 Palestinians who died in the conflict, as some mini-statistics imply. Taking a closer look on the Palestinian side, more than half of the dead are combatants, therefore participants in the armed conflict, or in other ways without a combatant status, for example a suicide bomber, but nonetheless a participant in the conflict. A quarter of the Arab women counted as victims are suicide bombers and combatants. The about 200 palestinian suicide bombers are all, according to Sahn, counted in the mentioned statistics of news agencies as victims of the Israelis. The same with the bomb builders, who are being killed in an "accident at work" by an explosion, and even those Palestinians who were murdered by their own people because of an alleged collaboration with Israel, for example providing information about planned Arab terror attacks. The number of dead women on the Israeli side is three times as high as on the Palestinian list of victims. That relation alone, if spread by the news agencies more than some other facts, which is not the case, could provide information about the nature of the "Al-Aqusa-Intifada".

One-sidedness and partisan analysis of the situation shape the majority's image of the German Middle East reporting, says Eldad Beck.

Large parts of the German media obviously see it as their duty not only to describe in their reports on the Arab-Israeli conflict what happened, but at the same time openly or not to evaluate the situation, usually with negative results for Israel.

Some examples given by Eldad Beck of the German media coverage are on the borderline of manipulation.

That applies to the editorial juxtaposition of a headline that has a possibly Israel friendly effect, by including pictures that are in no relation to the actual topic of the report but match the prevailing tendency to negatively view Israel. In its report with the headline "Israel is preparing to withdraw", a German newspaper put a large image with the explanation: "Israeli soldier aiming at an approaching man at a checkpoint in the West Bank." Eldad Beck proved in his speech this is not an isolated, singular case in the german media.



From right to left: Eldad Beck, Journalist (Yedioth Ahronoth), Ulrich W. Sahn, Correspondent for the Middle-East (n-tv), Amit Gilad (Spokesman of the Embassy of Israel in Berlin)

It is important how members of the Jewish community see the debate. Sacha Stawski and Andreas Nachama encounter as Jews the everyday anti-Semitism in Germany, which as all studies show is increasing, and is not only an issue of the political extreme. Anti-Jewish opinions are widely spread, also among the society at large, as Sacha Stawski proves with personal experience and as well with recent surveys. Understandable to 36% of Germans is the opinion: „I can well understand why some people find Jews unpleasant“. Thirty-five percent of the 18 - to - 29 year olds see a link between Israel's actions and the murder of Jews in Hitler's Germany, quoted Sacha Stawski from a survey by the weekly news magazine "Der Spiegel".

Naturally he does not oppose substantiated criticism of Israel or the Israeli administration, as has already long been expressed in Germany, stressed Sacha Stawski, but hatred of Israel and anti-Semitic partisanship is not to be accepted. He expressed an opinion, shared by all of the participants in the discussion.

Sacha Stawski criticized, like other on the panel, the biased choice of words

in politics and the media concerning the Middle East Conflict. It is visible in negative labels, such as "retaliation", to describe Israeli measures against terror. This formulation has recently been used in a German government statement, but is a description that has never been used when discussing measures against terror taken by the coalition forces in Afghanistan or in Iraq. Jewish German citizens are personally, as demonstrated with examples by Stawski and Nachama, repeatedly required to address the Middle East Conflict. The main source for the shaping of public opinion is naturally the German media. According to Stawski, Jewish pupils in German schools have been asked by their German teachers to stand up and justify the conduct of the Israeli Defense Forces.

Responsibility of media and politicians

The compelling question in this matter is one for social responsibility in media and politics. But until now, in contradiction with the "Historikerstreit" in the 80s, this question is only hesitantly put forward.

The Federal Office for Political Education, an institution reporting to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, conducted a study of the image of the Arab-Israeli Conflict on the German TV's main evening newscast. The Federal Office presented the study last year at a news conference. According to the results, both sides of the conflict - Palestinians and Israelis - got about the same amount of time in the TV reports. The study did not find any specific tendencies, but the visible image of Israel is increasingly determined by the superior military. Israel is put into the roll of the attacker, which might lead to loss of sympathy for Israel.

Well-known German media researcher, Rolf Behrens, who published this year a study of the newsmagazine "Der Spiegel's" reporting on Israel (Rockets Against Stonethrowers - The Image of Israel in the "Spiegel") has criticised the study by the German government. Even without knowledge of the scientific criticism, one can recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the TV research. The



survey acknowledges the negative effects of images like tanks and military, but who appears to be the attacker and who does not, does not only depend on the weapons or military systems used - as the war in Afghanistan showed.

If German TV never shows, for well understandable reasons, the bodies of murdered Israeli men, women and children torn apart by bombs - these pictures exist and one can see them on the Internet - but repeatedly shows wounded or dead Palestinians, while on the Israeli side only video of the Israeli military, certain effects are produced, consciously or not. Those responsible for these effects are those selecting the TV-images. Sahm described in his speech in Berlin the mechanism for partisan image communication and its related effects, not only with examples of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Connections become clearer, once you register the political signals of the spoken text in TV news. Previously mentioned was the example that Israeli measures taken against terror are labeled "retaliation" to delegitimize them. Furthermore, in TV news anti-Israeli, Arab terrorists are regularly not labeled as terrorists but "extremists" and "radicals", as pointed out by several participants at the Berlin discussion. A German TV station reported on the same day on a failed bomb attack on British police officers blaming "Irish terrorists", and afterwords on members of Hamas as "extremists".

Taking this into consideration, it is rather surprising the Federal Office's study, as happened recently, is used as a reference for a neutral/positive evaluation of the reporting on the Middle East Conflict without naming more recent studies. In the second round of the Berlin discussion in a debate with four members of the German Parliament - Gert Weisskirchen (SPD), Sybille Pfeiffer (CDU), Claudia Roth (Grüne) and Markus Löning (FDP) - the question regarding the evaluation of the media reporting was again raised. The responsibility of the Federal Office was directly addressed. It could be - in agreement with the results of the Berlin discussion - surely a good sign, if the Federal Office conducts a more current and com-

prehensive study on the increasing anti-Jewish, anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic tendencies, but not only in the media.

"There is a process in the media that only now has been recognized by us politicians," commented Gert Weisskirchen (SPD) on the critical results of the first round of the Berlin panel discussion. Weisskirchen said he was not previously conscious of the problematic biases in the media, and that the alarming descriptions took his breath away. The other members of parliament had a similar impression. One can comprehend it best, if one follows the Berlin debate not only in quotes, but in the original speeches available on the Internet at honestly-concerned.org, juedische.at, israelnetz.de. All speeches given and the discussions will be published in a planned book.



From left to right: Sacha Stawski (Honestly-Concerned), Rabbiner Dr. Andreas Nachama (Moses-Mendelssohn-Center), Rabbi Andrew Baker (AJC), Klaus Faber, retired State Secretary (Science Forum), Prof. Gert Weisskirchen, MP (SPD)

Sybille Pfeiffer (CDU) criticized at the Berlin Forum in clear words the false reporting in the German media. Claudia Roth (Bündnis 90/ Grüne) traced the deficiency in the Middle East reporting back to a lack on historical knowledge on part of the editors involved - an argument that plays as well a roll in the simultaneous French debate. Markus Löning (FDP) disassociated himself from the "Möller" trend in his party and shared the criticism of the tenor of the German media's coverage of the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Germany's place should be beside Israel, Löning said, especially given German history. This opinion was rejected by Sahm, who criticized, as described, the anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic propaganda in the German reporting of the Middle East, but calls for neutrality in the political orientation.

Anti-Semitism is a problem of the non-Jewish people that has negative effects

on the living together with Jews and the society as a whole. This has been pointed out by Claudia Roth, most certainly in agreement with almost all participants.

This marked position had an impact on the following discussion after the Berlin Forum on the 26th of June. Gert Weisskirchen initiated a plenary debate in the Bundestag about the increasing anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli tendencies in the German media. Furthermore, he indicated the possibility of involvement by party representatives in the "al" was approved by the other MPs. A question from the audience was directed towards the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that finances to a large extent the Hamburg "Orient Institute", whose head Prof. Udo Steinbach recently compared Arab suicide bombers with combatants of the Warsaw Ghetto and with this indirectly justified terror attacks against Israelis.

Prospects: The Debate Over the German Revisionist Movement And Whether It is Already Capable of Forming a Majority

In their first statements after the Berlin discussion the participants expressed a desire to better coordinate the initiatives against anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli tendencies in media and society. The beginning of a reaction to the problematic media coverage goes back, with some exceptions, to last year. The founding under difficult circumstances of "Honestly-Concerned" several publications and other media-related activities, also at universities, all played an important role in this context.

The building up of a loose network of diverse participants - for individual persons, groups, institutions and Internet forums - has only now been made possible. In any case most important is the connection of initiatives with different backgrounds and aims, as well as the connection of Jewish and non-Jewish supporters.

Some media reports tend to describe activities against anti-Semitism and hostility towards Israel above all as an issue of the Jewish representation supported by some non-jewish individuals. This false interpretation should be re-



jected whenever possible.

In the "Historikerstreit" in the 80s, the aim was to prevent a reinterpretation of history, that tried to equate the genocide and mass murder in the Soviet Union to the significance of the German Holocaust. This argument had been ended by the German President at that time.

If today 35% of those between the age of 18 and 29 in Germany compare Israel's actions to the murdering of Jews in Hitler's Germany, then that is certainly no minor attempt to reinterpret the Holocaust by German historians, than what we had seen in the 80s. Even a pronounced anti-Israeli interpretation of the Arab-Israeli Conflict cannot deny that this conflict, judged by the number of victims and extent of the grieve, must take a backseat to other armed conflicts - such as the north-south-war in Sudan with hundreds of thousands of dead and even more expellees; the Algerian Civil War; or the oppression of Tibetans in China, to name just a few. The comparison of Hitler's Germany and Israel by more than a third of adolescents allows the Holocaust - the greatest crime against humanity, not only of the 20th Century - to become a marginal note in history.

Can there be a doubt that their driving motive is relief from the own historical responsibility? Can German media, looking at their reporting of the

Middle East Conflict, convincingly claim not to know about these motives and its effects on their own reporting tendencies?

Responsibility for letting it go so far are the non-Jews in Germany; WE non-Jews and not the Jews are responsible. The public discussion after the "Möller-mann" provocation last year proves that many in the media, but as well in politics, easily and without consequences cross borders, that were once not tolerated. Even more disturbing than those deeds is the silence. A lot speaks in favor of the viewpoint that the quoted position of Solana is capable of forming a majority. An anti-Israeli movement with an anti-Semitic undertone is revising the historical responsibility of Germany for the Holocaust by comparing Israel and Hitler's Germany.

The difficulties facing initiatives opposing the new/old German revisionist movement are described above. Many do not see the dimensions of the problem or, like Solana, despite of all surveys and studies, simply deny its existence.

Andrew Baker, of the American Jewish Committee said in his concluding remarks at the Berlin Forum, the results of the media studies prove the critical opinions in the USA regarding the tendencies in the European media and specifically in Germany. On the other hand, the discussion in the Paul-Löbbecke-

House is a good sign - a sign that an opposing movement is becoming active. Some participants of the Berlin Forum on the 26th of June expressed relief at having heard a "different opinion". But some statements also suggests resignation opposing such a superior majority. The debate in the Paul-Löbbecke-House has united for the first time experts, persons affected by anti-Semitism and representatives of the four parliamentary groups on the topic, "Anti-Semitism, German Media and the Middle East Conflict". It has contributed to the solution of problematic German developments. A first important move. A visible change can only be expected after taking joint efforts, if necessary directed against a German majority, because the prejudices and characterizations to overcome are by now deeply anchored in the German public opinion, as the Berlin Forum has shown.

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"Honestly-concerned" was founded in May 2002. Alarmed by the growing anti-Israeli and resentment-loaded side effects of the Middle East Conflict, an increasing number of statements made by politicians and parts of the society and anti-Semitic tendencies in Germany and Europe, we decided to intervene. Since then, "honestly-concerned" has always taken action when politicians, the press or members of the public try to score with anti-Semitic or one-sided statements that are directed against Israel. One main focus is the observation of the media followed by a direct reaction.

The members of our initiative - Jews and non-Jews - declare their solidarity with the people of Israel. We are prepared to stand up against Anti-Semitism. One of our most important means of communication is a mailing list. We are using it to spread information, press reports and event listings. We organize campaigns, demonstrations and initiatives, and provide links to interesting websites and background information.

In a review of the past year, we can look back on a great number of accomplishments: events organized or supported

by us; on almost daily press review concerning domestic affairs, anti-Semitism and the Middle East Conflict; and a steadily growing number of mailing list users, campaigns and the exchange of information with correspondents, politicians and other disseminators, foreign or domestic.

This engagement costs time and money. Both are limited resources. To organize new events in the future, we are in need of financial help.

The following account is a sub account, especially for honestly concerned, administered by a founding member of our mailing list, Noemi Staszewski. She manages the incoming donations for honestly concerned.

N. Staszewski, Dresdner Bank
account: 06 360 002 02, sort code: 500 800 00
as payment for: honestly-concerned.org

Please support us generously, to enable our improvement of our activities