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German Media Censorship on Gaza?

By Ali Fathollah-Nejad - Gaza

Feb 16, 2009

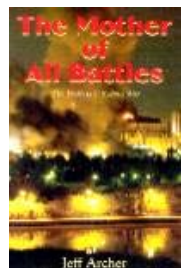
Germany's most prominent political debate TV program 'Anne Will' had announced to run a show on Gaza on 11 January, but in what many observers believe to be an unprecedented step canceled the topic only three days earlier. The talk show is broadcast every Sunday night by the country's foremost public-service broadcaster ARD while attracting on average 3.6 million viewers.

Official Germany Adopts Israeli Propaganda

On the evening of the second day (28 December) of the Israeli attacks on Gaza, the German government's spokesperson said that in a telephone conversation German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert "agreed that the responsibility for the development of the situation in the region clearly and exclusively lies with Hamas". The same further outlined the official version of the conflict according to the Berlin government which assembles the Christian-Democratic (CDU/CSU) and Social-Democratic (SPD) Parties: "Hamas unilaterally broke the agreement for a ceasefire, there has been a continuous firing of [...] rockets at Israeli settlements and Israeli territory, and without question - and this was stressed by the chancellor - Israel has the legitimate right to defend its own people and territory."

Along with the United States, Germany was fully backing Tel Aviv in its anew massive recourse to arms. Thus, unlike Britain and France where the political leaderships have to be attentive to avoid the explosion of outrage voiced particularly by their Muslim communities, German officials had to fear much less political ramifications resulting from protests that however occurred to a much lesser extent than e.g. in major U.S. and European capitals. This is due to two factors: One, compared to Britain's and France's Arab communities, it seems that German Turks - after all almost three million - are less politicized, especially when it comes to the Arab/Palestinian issue; second, as Germany's Muslims are largely excluded from the political process due to the country's comparatively harder path to gain citizenship, the responsiveness of political authorities tend to be on a lesser degree than in traditional ius soli countries.

What is more, the German media overwhelmingly and across the political spectrum represented the interpretation from the Israeli leadership, i.e. that the "Jewish State" would fight a defensive war against rocket-throwing Hamas terrorists with the noble cause of defending Western enlightened democracies, such as Israel, in the "war on terror" against Islamism. Those views were echoed from right- to left-leaning papers. The only German newspaper that had consistently and extensively covered the Gaza tragedy



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Israeli Pressures or Self-Censorship

Considering the overall one-sided German (and more broadly Western) media coverage of the situation in Gaza, the political statements voiced by German officials, and the cancelation of the "Anne Will" Gaza program, it can be suggested that the German "Israel Lobby" or the Israeli government pressured the broadcaster to cancel the show. The Israeli Embassy declared that this was "complete non-sense".

In an e-mail on 10 January, Massarrat had written: "One seems to be forced to suggest that it was Israel's government that pushed for the cancelation of the program. Thus, in the most important German TV network, the new Israel war cannot be discussed freely and critically. [...] The German raison d'Etat vis-à-vis Israel is obviously including press censorship [...]." It has been widely reported in the media that as a "lesson" to the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, this time Tel Aviv had in advance prepared a sophisticated propaganda and public-relations campaign - which might well have affected German media outlets' decision-making.

The alternative explanation implies that the editors themselves acted in self-censorship because of the quasi-taboo in Germany when it comes to any kind of critique vis-à-vis Israel.

"Prescribed Discriminatory Terminology"

A sequel of the correspondence between the program authorities and Professor Massarrat, which was also forwarded to the German Press Council that oversees the freedom of press, followed. Massarrat especially condemned the incessant journalistic usage of the attribute "radical Islamic" when it came to Hamas, whose "subtle demonization" would provide the audience with the "necessary pre-condemnation" exterminating any empathy when Israeli bombs fell upon Palestinians - "according to the motto, whoever is supporting an extremist organization, is responsible for the consequences". Against the background of German history - Jewish demonization and Germans' immunization toward Jewish suffering in the Nazi period - as well as the manipulation of public opinion in the current crisis, he urged that the "prescribed discriminatory terminology" be revoked. And indeed, there is hardly any journalist in German mainstream media who does not attribute "radical Islamic" or "terrorist" to Hamas, while "Zionist" or even "state-terrorist" is never being attributed when describing Israel. He concluded by warning that "foe images and demonization of the other psychologically pave the way for violence and war". Instead, the "spirit of cooperation and respect for other cultures" had to be promoted by the media.

Jewish Voices against Israel

One of the rare publicly heard voices opposing the invasion of Gaza was that of Professor Rolf Verleger, former chairman of the Jewish Community in Schleswig-Holstein (the northernmost of sixteen German states) who also serves on the board of directors of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. In an interview with the German public radio Deutschlandfunk (DLF), he criticized the Central Council's backing of the Israeli assault as being "shortsighted and amiss" since what was happening "in the name of Judaism" was and would be a problem for Judaism itself: "Judaism once was called 'the religion of acting charity', wasn't it? When I say that today, no one is going to believe me. Today Judaism is a religion which justifies land seizure and oppression of Arabs. This cannot be true! The Central Council of Jews in Germany must see this as a problem which must be confronted." The Central Council is known for its unconditional support for wars conducted by Israel.

The psychologist further noted that he sometimes had the feeling that German politicians were quite appreciating that "the Jews" and Israel become delinquent, which would be contributing to the "discharge" of Germany. "This is not responsible", concluded Verleger. To be responsible meant to signal Israel that it had to act according to international rules.

European Jews for a Just Peace (EJJP) Germany took out an ad in the



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Süddeutsche Zeitung, the country's highest-circulation newspaper of liberal couleur, headlined "German Jews say NO to the murdering by the Israeli army", which read: "We are appalled by this inhumanity. [...] Do German politicians really believe that it is a compensation of the murdering of our Jewish kinsfolk that Israel can now [...] do whatever crosses her mind?" It further noted: " Hamas is using terrorist methods, but this is also what the elected representation of Israel does, in fact hundredfold more effective."

In the same vein, Evelyn Hecht-Galinski, a Jewish-German activist and a daughter of the former president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany Heinz Galinski, writes: "Not the elected Hamas government, but the brutal occupation force, namely the government of a radical-Jewish state has to be taken to the The Hague war tribunal." She had previously called the Central Council acting as "mouthpiece of the Israeli government in Germany".

The online edition of the Süddeutsche Zeitung interviewed German-born Israeli peace activist and founder of "Gush Shalom" Uri Avnery, in which the 85-year old laid out that Israel had not been showing any interest to cut a peace deal with the Palestinians over the past years. These were indeed by and large the only voices dissenting from publicized mainstream opinion, severely attacked by neoconservative and pro-Zionist circles such as the blog Die Achse des Guten ("Axis of the Good").

Merkel's Media? Hardly Fair

Despite ongoing attacks on Gaza and the rising number of casualties, on the following Sunday, 18 January, the Gaza topic was again circumvented by the "Anne Will" show. While the competitor political talk show "Maybrit Illner" also hushed up the Gaza tragedy, the third major political talk show "hart aber fair" ("hard but fair" - also broadcast by ARD) took up the issue on its 19 January program entitled "Bloody ruins in Gaza – How far does our solidarity with Israel go?" In a poll posted on its website in the run-up to the program, the question was raised whether one should refrain from criticizing Israel. Almost 70 percent negated the question.

As Norman Finkelstein pointed out when laying down the sliding support for Israeli policies among Americans, "the propaganda edifice is beginning to fall apart. It's falling apart for many reasons. But I think the main reason is: More and more people know more and more of the truth about what's happening. It's due in part obviously to the alternative media". He added that "the challenge for all of us is to tell the truth", while advising "Tell no lies, stick scrupulously to the facts, claim no easy victories" and by doing so "we can win over public opinion to this cause".

It can be suggested that the massive Israeli propaganda efforts have been a reaction to those seemingly important shifts in Western public opinion. In an online poll conducted by Germany's leading conservative newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on whether Hamas or Israel were right, the results had been largely manipulated after the Israeli representation at the United Nations in Geneva had sent out an e-mail entitled "We need your votes", which led to the result of over 70 percent declaring solidarity with Israel.

The discussants appearing on the above mentioned "hart aber fair" show were Michel Friedman, a former vice-president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany and former chairman of the European Jewish Congress, Rudolf Dressler, a former German ambassador to Israel, Ulrich Kienzle, a veteran journalist specialized on the Middle East, Norbert Blüm, a former German Minister, and last but not least Udo Steinbach, former long-year director of German Institute for Middle East Studies. The latter had at the outset of the war on Gaza appeared on the country's prime daily TV news magazine ARD "Tagesthemen" as well as ZDF "Morgenmagazin" (a prominent morning news magazine), in which he denounced Israel's "brutal undertaking" in the first 36 hours of the attack with a death toll of 350, which was "simply immoral".

Instead of discussing the current conflict, the "hart aber fair" program focused on the issue of latent anti-Semitism. Correctly, Steinbach lamented the debate slipped off to "side scenes" instead of paying due attention to politics. However, noteworthy political remarks had been voiced. While Friedman emphasized Israel's right to defend herself against "Hamas terrorists", Kienzle replied that the problem in Germany was that while Palestinians killing

civilians were considered terrorists, Israelis doing the same were conversely called self-defenders. Blüm, a Christian believer who when criticizing Israel was repeatedly defamed as an anti-Semite, pointed to the continuous hardship under which Palestinians have been suffering. Steinbach emphasized the decades-long illegal occupation of land by Israel and the shortcomings of Western and Israeli policies to contribute to a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

After all, the "hart aber fair" program was hardly fair as it turned to ignore the Gaza conflict, but instead focused on the "if" and "how" criticism towards Israel should be voiced. This is a tactic frequently utilized in Germany to circumvent any facts-based debate on Israel–Palestine or even issues pertaining to Islamic countries, such as the Iran conflict. After all, Blüm made a statement which seems the most accurate one when it comes to Germany's judeocidal past and present Israeli crimes: "Our responsibility out of the terrible crimes of the Nazi era done to the Jews - incomparable crimes - ... my conclusion that I draw from that, my kind of Vergangenheitsbewältigung [a notion referring to a struggle to come to terms with the Nazi past—AFN], precisely because we have made ourselves guilty in such a way, to work for a world in which no longer people are being tortured, killed, oppressed, no matter where they are coming from. This is true for Israelis and Palestinians alike. [...] Human rights apply to everyone."

In sum, it can be concluded that most of the German media were indeed complying with Chancellor Merkel's will – it was not only Ms. Will.

- Ali Fathollah-Nejad is a German–Iranian political scientist focusing on the international relations of the Middle East. For the open letter, he gained the signatures of prominent figures outside of Germany. He contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com.

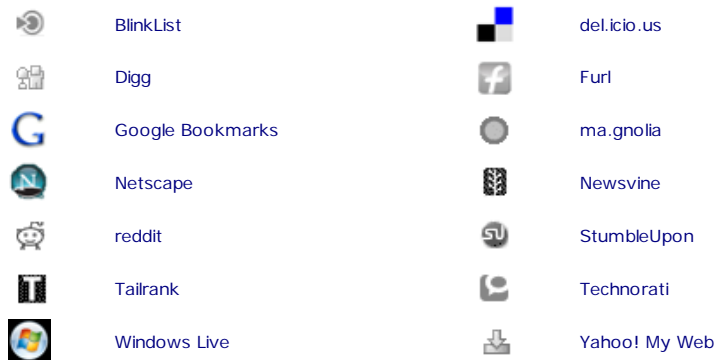
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