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Press Release on Anti-Semitism and Criticism of Israel in Germany

Disturbed by the acrimony of disputes between supporters and opponents of Israeli policy during the second Lebanon War (2006), the Peace Research Group at the University of Konstanz launched a still-ongoing research program on “Criticizing Israel, coming to terms with German history and differentiating aspects of modern anti-Semitism”. Supported by the German Research Foundation [Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – DFG], one of the projects in this program was a survey study which aimed at analyzing the structure of anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli attitudes, and broadening our understanding of the worldviews in which critical attitudes toward Israel are embedded.

After various publications in international journals, the findings of this survey are now brought together in book form:

Wilhelm Kempf (2015). Israelkritik zwischen Antisemitismus und Menschenrechtsidee. Eine Spurensuche. [Criticism of Israel between Anti-Semitism and Human Rights Considerations. A Search for Clues]. Berlin: verlag irena regener, ISBN 978-3936014-33-4, 276 pp., 39.90 €.

Based on a representative sample of ca. 1000 participants from both the old and new German states along with 450 more-or-less active critics of Israel, the survey findings show that not only anti-Semitic, but also anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli prejudices are widespread in the German population. Depending on the type of prejudice between 7 % and 48 % of Germans regard them to be legitimate political opinions, while only 37 % recognize a particular German responsibility toward the Jews.

Especially often expressed are secondary anti-Semitic demands for closing the books on the past, the belief in an international Jewish conspiracy, and anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli resentments. The latter find considerable agreement, especially if they carry a clearly recognizable political connotation, as expressed, e.g., in condemnation

of Israel as an occupying power. However, the more these resentments are articulated in an excessively generalizing and disproportionate manner, the less agreement there is and the more often they are rejected.

The widespread assumption that anti-Zionism is a variant of anti-Semitism, was not, however, empirically confirmed: To be sure anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist attitudes often go hand in hand, yet there is also a by no means small number of Germans who do, to be sure, hold anti-Zionist attitudes, but strictly reject any sort of anti-Semitic prejudices.

In agreement with earlier studies, according to which sympathy values for Israelis and Palestinians are positively correlated, it was also found that anti-Israeli and anti-Palestinian resentments are not opposed to each other. Rather, they reflect a broadly encompassing racism directed equally against Jews and Israelis, Palestinians and Arabs.

An explanation for this is provided by the universality of human rights principles, which condemn racist prejudices of every type. The more the participants were engaged for human rights, the fewer anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist attitudes they displayed, the less they tended toward one-sided assignment of guilt to Israel, to reject the Jews's right of residence in the Middle East and to transfer anti-Israeli resentments to Jews *per se*. However, they were also less likely to share anti-Palestinian resentments and more likely to see a need to change Israeli Palestine policy.

Unlike earlier studies, which were limited to investigating prejudices and resentments, the survey also reconstructed the interpretive frames with which the participants understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the typical patterns how they position themselves toward the conflict on the basis of their conflict understanding: as unconditional supporters of Israeli policy, as equally unconditional supporters of the Palestinian cause, or as critics committed to a settlement between the two societies, either due to a neutral attitude or due to solidarity with one side or the other, whose essential needs they see as especially threatened by continuing the status quo.

Thereby it appears that not only pro-Israeli, but also pro-Palestinian hardliners hold only minority positions, while most Germans are interested in a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. They do not, however, display sensitivity to the ambivalence in their interpretive frame.

Not only the continuation of the status quo, but also a peaceful settlement between Israel and the Palestinians is tied with mixed feelings for both sides. The perpetuation of the status quo promises security, because accustomed behavioral patterns can be continued, and it also creates insecurity, because it poses the threat of continued violence. A policy change promises security, because it promises an end of violence, and it also creates insecurity, because new behavioral patterns must be tried, whose effectiveness is still uncertain. With the majority of Germans, however, we find no awareness of such ambivalence: They only see – not just for Israel but also for Palestinians – the promising side of a peace settlement and the threatening side of the status quo.

Concealed behind this overall impression, which seems to be strongly marked by pacifism, there are not only various forms of critique, but also of support for Israeli Palestine policy. To identify them, the survey determined the constellations to which participants' positioning to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the ambivalence – or rather lack of ambivalence – that is associated with it, combines with anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli attitudes, on the one side, and as well, on the other side, with anti-Palestinian and islamophobic attitudes, pacifism, moral

disengagement and human rights orientation, as well as emotional proximity to the conflict and knowledge about the conflict.

As a result of this analysis, the survey identified four different varieties of support vs. critique:

- Support for Israeli policy (26 %)
- Latent anti-Semitic avoidance of criticizing Israel (11 %)
- Anti-Semitic criticism of Israel (26 %) and
- Human-rights oriented criticism of Israel (38 %)

Supporters of Israeli policy can be divided into two sub-groups, the first of which consists predominantly of pro-Israeli hardliners, while the second group is smaller and positions itself less strongly in favor of Israeli policy.

Common to both groups is, for one thing, rejection of (most) of anti-Semitic prejudices and, for another, a tendency to resentment against Palestinians and Muslims, who are placed under a blanket suspicion of terrorism.

Conspicuous is, however, that both groups support the secondary anti-Semitic demand to close the books on the past, for which reason one must ask how reliable the support for Israel of these ostensible friends really is, and how many of them position themselves in favor of Israel only because they themselves want to be seen positively by the world.

Latent anti-Semitic avoidance of criticizing Israel is characteristic of a group of Germans who mostly take no position, but relatively often give the impression that they are interested in a settlement between the two societies and thereby sympathize more with the Israelis.

This group of participants places the Israeli security dilemma in the foreground more often than all other groups, and tends not only to demonize Islam, but also to make blanket accusations of terrorism against Palestinians and Muslims. At the same time, however, it also displays a tendency to anti-Zionist and anti-Israel attitudes, as well as to belief in an international Jewish conspiracy, and it tends to anti-Semitic perpetrator-victim reversal and to the demand for closing the books on the past. It does not even distance itself from the allegation that the treatment of Palestinians in Israel shows "the true face of the Jews."

The conclusion that this avoidance of criticism actually involves a latent anti-Semitic attitude is also strengthened by the fact that it is not only found more often among NPD voters than in the remainder of the population, but also represents the only attitude that besides openly anti-Semitic criticism of Israel is also found on the extreme right-wing of society.

The overwhelming majority of Germans takes the Palestinian side more strongly than the Israeli and can be divided into two groups:

Anti-Semitic critics of Israel share strong to very strong anti-Semitic prejudices and are not only typically NPD voters, but rather often also found in the center of society (especially among CDU/CSU voters). Among Green and Linke party voters they are somewhat less common.

To be sure, human-rights oriented critics of Israel likewise position themselves in favor of the Palestinians, but at the same time they reject any kind of anti-Semitic prejudices. They are generally better informed about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and not only better than anti-Semitic critics, but also better than supporters of Israeli policy.

They display greater emotional proximity to the conflict, their pacifism is stronger, and their human-rights orientation is more consistent than that of anti-Semitic Israel critics.

Their positioning in favor of the Palestinians is more radical, the better informed they are on the conflict, the greater their emotional proximity is to the conflict, the more strongly marked their pacifism, the more consistent their human-rights orientation, the more they reject the limitation of human rights, the less they tend to moral disengagement and the more strongly they defend victims of human rights violations.

With anti-Semitic critics of Israel it is just the opposite. The more radically they position themselves in favor of the Palestinians, the less informed they are, the less emotional proximity they have to the conflict, the weaker their pacifistic attitude is, the more inconsistent their human-rights orientation is and the less they defend the victims of human-rights violations.

In contrast to human-rights oriented critics of Israel, who condemn every sort of prejudice, anti-Semitic critics of Israel are not only anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist and hostile to Israel, but also show themselves to be prejudicial in general, and share resentments hostile to Palestinians and Islam as well.

While anti-Semitic hardliners are relatively common in the German population, hardliners who take the Palestinian side due to their human-rights engagement are only rare and in the middle of society – among voters of Germany's two large popular parties, the CDU/CSU and SPD not found at all. The overwhelming majority of human-rights oriented critics of Israel are relatively moderate.

Among active critics of Israel who were recruited through various institutions that work for peace in the Middle East, to be sure hardliners constitute a majority, but anti-Semitic criticism of Israel is not found among them. If it is true what the French-Jewish philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy said in his highly regarded speech at the UN General Assembly, if it is true that the struggle against anti-Semitism is the farthest frontline in the struggle for humanity, then this fight should not let itself be drawn onto wrong paths through a misjudgement of the situation, and globally stigmatize criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic.

At any rate, four of ten Germans are critical of Israeli policy, because they defend human rights, equally reject anti-Semitism and islamophobia and condemn a policy that is not only unjust to Palestinians, but also threatens to destroy Israel from within. This, at any rate, is what critical Jewish intellectuals fear in Israel and the Diaspora, in Germany and the USA, if there is no change of policy in Israel. "If we leave the situation as it is," writes the Israeli author Etgar Keret, "without offering the people who live under our occupation a solution, our country will finally be ruined."

Wilhelm Kempf