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## **GERMANY: Antisemitism in Germany : « As Muslims, we must tackle this »**

In Germany, protests about the Israel-Gaza conflict involved antisemitic outbursts. Local Muslim communities have distanced themselves from these.

By Kersten Knipp

DW(19.05.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3wcjKEa> – He knew exactly why he was going to the demonstration. Mazen, a 30-year-old Syrian refugee, wanted to protest against the violence he believed

Israel was inflicting unjustly. And he explained his motivation for attending the demonstration like this: "My friends and I are opposed to the illegal expulsion of people from their homes. We say no to the killing of children and the unnecessary bombing of buildings and vital infrastructure."

Mazen, who did not want to use his full name, displays a position that the general German public finds controversial. Not least because the parties to this conflict and their supporters present crucial details in different ways.

Israel explains its evictions in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheik Jarrah as property disputes. As a result of the 1949 peace agreement, the law says Jews who were pushed out of east Jerusalem during fighting may reclaim their lost property. The Palestinians say this is illegal expropriation.

With regard to the victims of the armed conflict with Hamas, the Israeli military says that the Islamist terror organization places military assets in the midst of civilian populations and that Israel warns civilians before planned attacks. At the same time, Amnesty International is demanding that such Israeli attacks be investigated as war crimes by the International Criminal Court.

Mazen has a strong opinion on Israel: "I would be a liar if I said that we want to be friends with the state of Israel. But it's there, it exists. We must deal with it." This attitude did not prevent him from joining a protest that was planned jointly by Palestinian and Israeli organizations that are critical of Israel's stance on the Palestinian Territories.

## **“The whole protest is not antisemitic”**

Although Mazen did not see any at the demonstration he attended, he concedes that there had been antisemitic actions at others. “You can’t control everyone,” he pointed out.

There are always a handful of people at demonstrations who will behave badly, he says. “It was the same in Syria. We would all be demonstrating for democratic values but there would always be some guy in the crowd calling for an Islamic state. In Germany, you get some people calling out antisemitic things. But you cannot say that the whole protest is antisemitic because of that.”

At the same time, it is impossible for Germans to ignore the antisemitic utterances from some larger groups at other demonstrations. Participants at a demonstration in Gelsenkirchen yelled out “shit Jews.” This has triggered a debate about antisemitism among Muslims and migrants and the community has come under pressure to justify itself.

Referring to a video from the Gelsenkirchen protests, Aiman Mazyek, who heads the Central Committee of Muslims in Germany, made his opinions clear: “(I) definitively condemn such disgusting scenes,” he wrote on Twitter. “Those who deplore racism but then spread antisemitic hatred themselves have forfeited everything.”

## **Naming the problem**

Eren Guvercin, the founder of the Muslim Alhambra Society in Germany, which promotes international understanding, isn't surprised by the video. Antisemitism among Muslims in Germany becomes visible occasionally, and most commonly when violence in the Middle East escalates. "But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist in quieter times as well," he said.

Antisemitism is a central ideological component for a number of extremist Islamist organizations, Guvercin explained, and these also try to promote it in more moderate Muslim communities. "This is something we have to deal with as Muslims first and foremost. But often this fails because the problem cannot even be named."

Clearly antisemitic slogans were shouted in some cases, conceded Bulent Ucar, a professor of Islamic theology at Osnabrück University. "There are good arguments against Israel's policy of occupation and dispossession, which is against international law," he told DW. "But there are also polarizing actors, who are loading this political dispute in the Middle East with antisemitism, and then trying to transfer it to Europe. This is not at all acceptable. There is no justification for Jews in Germany to be threatened and harassed. That's inexcusable and a total no-go."

### **Legitimate criticism or antisemitism?**

Orkide Ezgimen, who heads the Discover Diversity project at the Kreuzberg Initiative against antisemitism in Berlin, agrees that different motivations were on display at the

demonstrations. There was criticism of Israel's actions against the Palestinians but also a lot of potential for aggressive behavior, some of which include antisemitic sentiments.

"These reference German history, such as the Holocaust," she said. "That is clearly antisemitic. Of course, in a democracy one has the right to demonstrate against the policies of another country – but not in all forms. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, you have to distinguish very clearly between legitimate criticism and antisemitism."

### **Problematic reactions**

Islamic scholar Lamyia Kaddor makes another important point: "The attacks on synagogues are terrible, they are a disgrace," she emphasized. But the reactions to them from German society are also problematic, she added. "We have been dealing with this [antisemitism] for a long time in this country. But we should not be pitting one minority against another minority. That will only divide our communities further."

As a Muslim, Rachid Amjahad, head of the Düsseldorf-based Society for the Culture and Science of the Maghreb, believes it's crucial to speak out clearly against antisemitism. At the same time, he is opposed to collectively blaming local Muslim communities for the antisemitic attacks. It has always impacted him deeply when mosques are attacked in Germany. "Of course, we wish for solidarity then," he said. "On the other hand, we also have to provide this solidarity when other denominations' institutions are attacked. Solidarity is not a

one-way street.”

## **Not acceptable**

Guvercin of the Alhambra Society goes a step further. He deplores what he calls the “double standards” among some of the participants of pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Germany: “Those who chant ‘shit Jews’ in front of synagogues and reject Israel’s right to exist are antisemitic and have no interest in peace,” he said. “Those who romanticize nihilistic terror organizations like Hamas and who justify their terrorism with reference to the Israeli government’s policies, are only accepting the destructive tendencies of a terror organization. This is not acceptable to me as a Muslim.”

Theology professor Ucar says that antisemitic tendencies are not all the same. The origin of the families and personal experience also make a difference. “A Muslim from Bosnia, for example, usually has a very different relationship to Israel than a Syrian, for example,” he said. Irrespective of this, there is a need for more dialogue, personal exchanges and encounters between Muslims and Jews.

## **Religious conflicts**

In the long term, there is something else to consider, Ezgimen of the Kreuzberg Initiative, said. On one hand, Germany’s historical responsibility because of the Holocaust is “completely correct,” said Ezgimen, who works mostly with refugees. “But German politics has not yet succeeded in

spreading that message to all parts of the population equally,” she explained. “A lot of people who have a non-German origin story are dealing with a German culture of remembrance that confronts them with the suffering of others.” Sometimes this gives refugees from war and crisis zones the impression that their own experiences are seen as less important. “This quickly leads to a struggle for recognition,” she suggested.

In the short term, the focus should be on keeping the impact of the Middle East conflict on Germany in check, said Maghreb Society activist Amjahad. “If protests are being held in front of synagogues, that becomes very dangerous,” he concluded. “Because then it turns a territorial conflict into a religious one. And that will be very difficult to resolve.”

Photo : Christian MANG – REUTERS

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