

German police beat demonstrators protesting Israel's genocidal war against Gaza

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Berlin, April 1 (RHC)-- German-Israeli activist Iris Hefets was arrested for the first time in Berlin just a few weeks after the start of Israel's war on Gaza last October – for holding a sign which read, “As a Jew and Israeli, stop the genocide in Gaza.”

That time, the police told Hefets, a 56-year-old psychoanalyst who is a member of the anti-Zionist activist group Jewish Voice for Peace, it was down to a blanket ban on pro-Palestinian demonstrations. She was released shortly afterwards but says: “I didn't think I would get detained for that – I was naive it turns out.”

She was arrested a second time on November 10th for “inciting racial hatred” when she held the same sign – her charge was recently dropped. Her third arrest was for a sign warning that “Zionism kills.” Again, she was released soon after but, this time, her sign was confiscated.

Hefets has lodged a complaint with the police to get her sign back, and intends to put it in a future “museum of Palestinian liberation”, she says. She believes that, for the latter two arrests at least, the decision to detain her was made on the advice of a new special police task force which “is the contact point available for all police forces in connection with the Middle East conflict”, a Berlin police spokesman confirmed to Al Jazeera. The task force was set up on October 30 last year – shortly after Israel's war on Gaza began.

This “Besondere Aufbauorganisation” (BAO) task force, which is part of the Landeskriminalamt (LKA) – the police intelligence centre – keeps an eye on “left-wing and foreign ideologies”, including communist groups and pro-Palestine groups, the police spokesman confirmed. It issues guidance and instructions to police forces about what phrases and words used by activists may be deemed illegal. For example, the Berlin police spokesman told Al Jazeera that, in Berlin, using the phrase “from the river to the sea” is currently considered a crime.

“The criminal classification of .. slogans is carried out in close consultation with the Berlin public prosecutor's office,” the Berlin police spokesman said.

Palestinian protesters seem to be bearing the brunt of police crackdowns on protests in Germany – “We Jews are just getting arrested, the Palestinians are being beaten,” Hefets says. One example was the brutal arrest of a hijab-wearing protester at a sit-in in Berlin central station this past weekend, which was captured on video and posted to social media channels.

But Hefets believes her group of Jewish activists is also being specifically targeted at demonstrations because of its Jewish identity. Last week, Jewish Voice's bank account was frozen ahead of mid-April's Palastina Kongres (Palestine Congress) – for “regulatory reasons”, according to the state-owned Berliner Sparkasse bank. The group's account has been frozen before, in 2019, because of its support for the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

“They [Jewish protesters] get in the way of the narrative of Jews being protected by Germans against Muslims – but when you see Jews marching, then you see it's not needed,” says Hefets. Her case was one of the reasons that Germany's ranking was dropped to “narrowed” in the Civicus Monitor, an annual ranking that measures civic freedoms to protest.

“Germany's downgrade should be a wake-up call for the country and continent to change course,” said Tara Petrovic, Europe and Central Asia researcher at Civicus Monitor. But there have been many other incidents of heavy-handed policing – or, as critics charge, repression.

Earlier this month, Berlin police raided a 41-year-old woman's apartment for writing “from the river to the sea” four times on social media. This was reported by police as “usage of anti-constitutional symbols”, the same law that bans displaying the swastika, the symbol of the Nazis.

But this was just one particularly stark example of Germany's strict policing – or, critics charge, repression – of pro-Palestinian speech. The legality of the phrase, “from the river to the sea”, has been interpreted differently across Germany's federal states. A court in the central state of Hesse ruled in late March that an event named “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free for Everyone” could go ahead, on the basis that the phrase could have many different meanings.

However, in mid-November, the phrase was banned by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, which considered it a call to destroy Israel and said it should be regarded as a slogan of Hamas, which has been formally labelled a terrorist organisation in Germany.

In November, the phrase was banned in Bavaria where public prosecutors said they considered the phrase to be supportive of Hamas and should be subject to the same law that bans showing the Nazi swastika.

Germany's capital city, Berlin, which is home to the largest Palestinian community (estimated at 300,000) in Europe, has been a particular flashpoint for clashes between demonstrators and police. Prosecutors have registered 2,140 possible criminal cases and launched more than 380 investigations between October 7, 2023 and mid-February 2024.

Recent arrests amount to an “almost unprecedented” crackdown on freedom of speech since October 7, according to Berlin-based migration and criminal lawyer Alexander Gorski. He warned that laws which were originally designed to combat hate speech in Germany are now fast approaching a “very dangerous restriction of expression which could set a precedent which severely limits the freedom of expression in this country”.

In one case in December, seven residential and business properties were raided by 170 police officers a statement was posted on Instagram by feminist collective Zora expressing support for “all revolutionary Palestinian freedom fighters” including the PFLP (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), which has been categorised as a terrorist group by the EU since 2002 – as a “progressive force”. Investigations are ongoing.

“Germany rightfully decided that there should be restrictions on political speech after the second world war, but some of the laws which should protect democracy are narrowing down the political discourse around Palestine and Israel,” Gorski said.

Since October 7, this has led to “absurd” situations such as “Jewish activists being detained for alleging Israel is committing a genocide”, he added.

Another German-Israeli member of Jewish Voice for Peace in the Middle East, a female software developer in her mid-50s who spoke to Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity, was detained by five police officers for holding up a sign “Another Jew for a Free Palestine” after coming to Berlin for a number of protests in February.

The activist said police told her that the sign's combination of a Jewish flag in Palestinian colours could be understood as “a call to destroy Israel”.

“When they first surrounded me – this still haunts me at night,” the activist said, adding that the experience had made her question her decision to move here. “The police want to frame it all as hate speech, but what we are saying is freedom.”

Chatham House fellow and Germanist Hans Kundani described the country's “Zionist McCarthyism” for its zeal in cancelling or prosecuting those who criticise Israel or its response to October 7 in an essay titled Zionism uber alles (“Zionism above all”).

Despite lukewarm public support for the war on Gaza – 69 percent of German citizens responding to a poll by broadcaster ZDF said Israel's military actions in Gaza were unjustified in late March – lawmakers have continued to support it unwaveringly. "What has emerged in the last decade is not so much a post-Zionist Germany as a hyper-Zionist Germany," Kundani wrote.

Despite demographic change, he added, "German elites have doubled down on their commitment to Israel" partly because "they fear their understanding of the lessons of the Nazi past is no longer widely shared, and they want to make it non-negotiable before it is too late."

Palestinian activist Ola Alzayat attended a protest in February and explains that, being pregnant, she took special care to stay out of trouble. Suddenly, "somebody grabbed my face from behind. I didn't know what was going on", she says.

It was the police. In a video of the incident which has been seen by Al Jazeera, a visibly pregnant Alzayat can be seen being dragged away by the neck, with her keffiyeh pulled from her neck to her face. She is screaming: "I'm pregnant, please, please!"

Alzayat says that officers slapped her face when she tried to move, leaving her with bruising. They initially accused her of trying to "prevent an arrest", later adding another accusation of hitting police officers with a flag, even though she claims not to have even had a flag with her.

She says she was carried by five officers and put into a police car, from which she saw her husband being arrested as well. Though the charge of preventing an arrest was dropped, she says investigations continue over the allegations that she assaulted a police officer.

Stella Maris being arrested at an anticolonial demonstration in Germany [Courtesy of Andrés Trujillo]
Artist and activist Stella Maris has been arrested three times since October 7. At an anticolonial demonstration that she took part in, she said the police declared that Palestine had "nothing to do with colonialism" and so Palestinian flags were banned.

"They arrested me and tried to tackle me to the floor just for wearing a Palestinian flag," she says. "They said it was the same as the swastika, an illegal symbol I could never show in a public space."

At another demonstration, Meris was holding a sign which read "from the river to the sea, we demand equality". After leaving, she went to a nearby metro station, where she says about 15 police officers were looking for her. She was arrested on charges of inciting racial hatred. "At that time I didn't know that the slogan was in the process of being criminalised," she says.

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