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Germany's fall from grace

The German government's stance on the war in Gaza is causing lasting harm to the country's reputation around the world. There's still time to fix this

The war in Gaza shows no signs of ending, and yet it is already having long-term strategic consequences for German foreign policy. Gaza 2023/2024 is a critical juncture for Germany's relationship with the Global South. The federal government's decision to unambiguously side with Israel, together with the restriction of shows of solidarity with Palestine on a domestic level, have exposed Germany well beyond the confines of the Middle East.

Images of the deployment of German weapons in Gaza and of the violent dispersal of pro-Palestinian protests are going around the world and challenge the country's image as a bastion of human and civil rights in a manner that is unprecedented in recent history. Germany's reputation, established over recent decades, is in danger of disappearing into thin air.

Parallel universes

Representatives of German organisations abroad, in particular, are experiencing this first-hand — and not only in the Middle East and North Africa. In solidarity with Palestine, unions are suspending their cooperation with German foundations; trusted human rights organisations are cutting previously reliable ties with German organisations; artists are calling for a boycott; German scholars are facing rejection and resentment; and even the local staff of German organisations abroad is turning its back on the country. Access and trust, even to long-term partners, are being lost at rapid speed. This loss of trust has been particularly grave in Arab countries, where only nine per cent of the population still has a positive image of Germany, the lowest level in decades. This contrasts strongly with previous surveys, when German foreign policy had a predominantly positive image.

One of the reasons for this downfall is the broad international awareness of the German political and media discourses on Gaza, which seem like it

was taken out of a parallel universe both for audiences abroad but also for domestic experts of the region. The heavy restrictions imposed on pro-Palestinian demonstrations, the violent dispersal of student protests at German universities, the deportation of prominent voices – including modern-day Arab folk heroes such as the British-Palestinian doctor Ghassan Abu-Sittah – as well as the criminalisation of Palestinian slogans and cultural symbols like the *keffiyeh* have effectively created an image of Germany as a country that is either unwilling or incapable of differentiating between legitimate protests against war crimes and the threats posed by antisemitism for Jewish people in Germany.

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Not only in the Global South but also in neighbouring European countries, people are startled by the debates in Germany and their primary focus on the analytical vocabulary with which the war in Gaza is to be legitimately portrayed. These debates, however, mostly take place on an abstract level, detached from the brutal reality of the war. There is, in fact, only limited awareness among the German public of the suffering in the Gaza Strip, not least because critical voices are increasingly vilified or fall upon deaf ears. One thing is certain: Germany is no longer the go-to location of a progressive Arab diaspora, as the Egyptian sociologist Amro Ali once described Berlin.

This rift is all the more striking because Germany's reputation in the wider Middle East was relatively good. The absence of a colonial past (at least in the region) was not the only reason for this. Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's rejection of Western military intervention in the Arab World and his successor Angela Merkel's refugee policy created the impression of a country that was genuinely interested in human rights in the region. The prioritisation of foreign policy soft power, the work carried out by German political foundations and cultural institutions as well as substantial German engagement in the sector of development cooperation further cemented this image. For many years, Germany's reputation was not even tarnished by the country's extremely close relationship with Israel. Civil-society players, in particular, often voiced some understanding of Germany's view that its history lent it a particular responsibility for the Jewish state.

This balancing act, however, has met its limits. In the political imaginaries of the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had never gone away. For Palestinians, evidently, it remained an oppressive and

everyday lived reality. Yet, amid the mass protests of Arab Spring, the war against the so-called Islamic State, the nuclear conflict with Iran and the efforts of autocratic regimes to normalise relationships with Israel, the Palestine question barely featured in the wider region. The events of 7 October and Israel's military intervention have brought it back, though, both emotionally and politically, as a key issue of political relations in the Middle East.

Beyond the Arab World, too, Palestine has become a projection screen for people in large areas of the Global South. In Germany, colonial interpretations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may often be regarded disparagingly as evidence of academic 'wokeism' and as a mechanism to demarcate antagonist camps in a broader societal culture war. Large parts of the Global South, however, see events in Gaza *de facto* through a post-colonial lens: well beyond the Arab World, the Palestinian people's experience of occupation acts as a point of reference that people can associate with their own history. For many, Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza, accompanied by dehumanising rhetoric, revives memories of their own experiences of suppression and bloody wars of national liberation.

Germany's double standards

In particular, the accusation that different assessment standards apply to Israel is sapping German credibility. It was indeed German politicians who described Putin's invasion of Ukraine early on as a 'war of annihilation' and 'genocide'. Yet, in the case of Palestine, the mere question as to whether similar accusations can be levelled at Israel for its actions in Gaza exposes analysts to allegations of antisemitism and of reproducing the myth of Palestine as a victim. On several occasions, the German government abstained at the UN General Assembly when voting on a ceasefire. And even at the UN Human Rights Council, the German government opposed a resolution to prevent all weapons sales to Israel.

The latter is hardly surprising given the close bilateral ties in the arms industries of both countries, which render such an export ban unattractive — both from an economic and a security policy perspective. Germany and Israel entertain close cooperation in the arms sector. For many years, Israel has been a valued supplier of modern weapon systems to Germany and also one of the most important recipients of German military hardware. Since 7 October, arms exports have increased almost tenfold. Germany is thus actively contributing to Israel's security — yet possibly also to war crimes committed in Gaza.

Germany's unwillingness or inability to condemn and sanction Israel's type of warfare reinforces the impression that for Germany, Staatsräson trumps the rules-based world order.

Although the federal government reiterates that it has no information about German arms being used for breaches of international law, the documented deployment of German weapons by the Israeli army does at least cast some doubt on this assertion. In any case, photographs of German anti-tank weapons and frigates involved in the fighting in Gaza, which have been shared by Israeli soldiers on social media, leave a much stronger impression of the country's participation in this war than the symbolic dropping of food rations out of German aircraft over Gaza ever will. They also overshadow claims by the government that it is striving to mitigate the consequences of the war for the civilian population through humanitarian aid.

Against this backdrop, the German '*Staatsräson*' (reason of state) has been disseminated into the vocabulary of the Global South and of a growing global anti-war movement. There, it describes a clash of values arising from Germany's traditional position at Israel's side, born as a consequence of the German genocide against the Jews, and the explicit commitment of this particular government to a values-based and feminist foreign policy — a commitment that is at odds with all indicators of human suffering in Gaza, which leaves even seasoned observers of armed conflicts speechless: from the man-made starvation of the population to the systematic withholding of medical supplies, the repeated mass evictions of internally displaced persons and the AI-backed bombardment of residential areas and refugee camps.

Germany's unwillingness or inability to condemn and sanction this type of warfare reinforces the impression that for Germany, *Staatsräson* trumps the rules-based world order — an order that Germany, more than hardly any other country, has promoted internationally as a lesson from its own genocidal crimes in the past. It is true that some of the most vocal critics of the government today have shown little respect for human rights themselves. This, however, does nothing to invalidate the accusations that Germany is shutting its eyes to Israel's war crimes in Gaza — not to speak of the international resonance of these accusations.

Far-reaching consequences

Far beyond the confines of the Middle East, the war is politicising an entire generation. On the one hand, the 'TikTokisation' of militant

organisations such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis is driving new supporters towards a form of political Islam that wants to recast itself in a modern light. On the other, the progressive, critical civil societies, the defenders of human and civil rights, are also turning their backs on a Germany that is now perceived as untrustworthy. It is precisely these groups, though, that a values-based foreign policy wanted to address in the first place. For many progressive groups, the Palestinian cause has always constituted a key element of their own foray into activism — also because regimes in the region have long tolerated civil-society mobilisation in solidarity with Palestine as a political valve. These individuals are now turning their backs on Germany. The grudges that they bear are, in some cases, even stronger than those towards the US. While they have not trusted the latter ever since the Iraq War, they feel downright betrayed by Berlin.

Germany needs to address this erosion of its credibility at all costs. At its heart is the discrepancy between its unconditional solidarity with Israel and its commitment to a world order based on international law. Both are core principles of German foreign policy, which should not and must not be in opposition to one another.

Germany's Israel policy should be submitted to a reality check.

Even if Germany believes it is being exposed to unfair scrutiny, it must explain its position better and make tangible adjustments. Ever since the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court requested the issuing of an arrest warrant against Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, the contradiction between the German *Staatsräson* and international law is no longer an abstract accusation but has become a concrete scenario.

Furthermore, Germany's Israel policy should be submitted to a reality check. In Israel, individuals identifying as right-wing extremists, who have no interest in a peaceful resolution of the conflict, hold government responsibility. Radical solutions to the conflict in the Middle East, such as the Israeli reoccupation and repopulation of the Gaza Strip, have found approval even at the heart of the political centre. In Germany, there is little appreciation of this societal shift to the right — but politicians also shy away from taking too close a look. Instead of viewing Israel as it really is, they cling to a projection of the country that serves German post-war identity but offers a poor reference point for a clearheaded foreign policy.

The Gaza conflict in 2024 is already a symbol of untold civil misery. In contrast to similarly destroyed urban areas such as Aleppo or Grozny, it is also symbolic of Western double standards. The inaction of the federal government when faced with war crimes in Gaza will inevitably allow regimes throughout the world to evade and deflect accusations of human rights violations. Germany must thus regard this war as a stress test for the entire rules-based world order. There will be no return to the previous status quo.

For the first time in many years, there is global interest in the realisation of a two-state solution. Despite the frictions that this war is engendering, the vast majority of countries favour this solution. To give this scenario a chance, hope on its own will not be sufficient — especially as the current Israeli government is bragging about the prevention of this very scenario. Instead, Germany must walk the talk. Less lip service and greater political pressure on Israel are imperative to give peace a chance.



Marcus Schneider
Beirut

Marcus Schneider heads the FES regional project for peace and security in the Middle East, based in Beirut, Lebanon. Previously, he worked for the FES as head of the offices in Botswana and Madagascar, among others.



Jannis Grimm
Berlin

Dr. Jannis Julien Grimm heads the research group *Radical Spaces* at the Center for Interdisciplinary Peace and Conflict Research at Freie Universität Berlin.