

Berlin police raid and shut down conference opposing Gaza genocide

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On Friday afternoon, the German capital of Berlin witnessed scenes reminiscent of the era of the Nazi regime. Hundreds of police officers terrorised an anti-war congress, which was directed against Israel's genocide in Gaza, in order to disperse and ban it after two hours.

Prominent speakers were expected at the congress, organised by the Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East and attended by several pro-Palestinian organisations. They included former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, Irish MP Richard Boyd Barrett, British-Palestinian doctor and rector of Glasgow University Ghassan Abu-Sitteh, 86-year-old Palestine expert Salman Abu Sitta, a former member of the Palestinian National Council, Jewish filmmaker Dror Dayan and Palestinian journalist Hebh Jamal.

The media and political establishment unleashed a vicious smear campaign against the congress in advance. From the tabloid Bild to the "respectable" Tagesspiegel, they denounced the participants as "Israel-haters." Bild headlined on Friday morning: "Congress of Israel haters. These terrorist fans are appearing in Berlin today."

An all-party "Alliance against Anti-Semitic Terrorism," which spans politicians from the right-wing Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union to the Left Party, declared that the Congress was expected to "spread anti-Semitic hatred" and that Berlin should not become "the centre of terrorist glorification." For the Left Party, former Berlin Senator for Culture Klaus Lederer and former Berlin Labor Senator Elke Breitenbach signed the appeal.

The police acted accordingly. Ghassan Abu-Sitteh was denied entry at the Berlin Airport. The doctor, who worked at the Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza after the beginning of the war and gave a harrowing interview to Der Spiegel on 6 December about his terrible experiences there, was to give a lecture at the congress in the evening. Instead, he was told that he was not allowed to enter Germany until April 14.

When the location of the congress was announced on Friday morning (the organisers had kept it secret for security reasons), a large contingent of police was mobilised. Of the 2,500 police officers scheduled for the entire conference weekend, almost 900 surrounded the congress hall in Tempelhof and set up barriers. About 25 people attended a counter-demonstration against the congress organised by the CDU and Zionist groups.

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Under the pretext of “fire safety regulations,” the police restricted access to the congress hall. Although the hall is designed for 1,000 people, they only allowed 250 people to enter. The queue of another 250 people, who were not allowed in, was unceremoniously deemed by the police to be a gathering that had to be dissolved by 3:00 p.m. At the same time, the police arrested people waiting in line, including a member of the Jewish Voice holding up a banner reading “Jews Against Genocide.”

While denying registered participants access to the meeting, the police smuggled several dozen non-accredited journalists into the building through a back entrance, most of whom came from the Springer press, which was the worst agitator against the congress.

Uniformed and armed police officers were also in the meeting room to intimidate the participants. Due to the obstructions by the police, the congress was only able to start after a long delay. The pretext for its dissolution was a video lecture by Salman Abu Sitta, who had also been denied entry.

Abu Sitta, who was expelled from Palestine as a child in 1948, has devoted his life to the cause of the Palestinians, engaging in public debates with Israeli peace activists, such as Uri Avnery and Rabbi Michael Lerner.

Two minutes after the start of the video lecture, 30 to 40 police officers stormed the podium at around half past 4:00 to block the transmission. They allegedly cited illegal content as justification. Subsequently, the police violently broke into the control room and switched off electricity and lights in the congress hall in order to interrupt the livestream from the congress.

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Less than an hour later, at 5:24 p.m., the police dissolved the congress and ordered the participants to leave the meeting room. The police gave no reason for this at the location. Later, they justified their arbitrariness with the danger that speakers could deny the Holocaust or glorify violence.

A short time later, Udi Raz, board member of the Jewish Voice for Peace and co-organiser of the Palestine Congress, was arrested. In an interview with Junge Welt, she reported that her arrest was justified on the grounds that she had called a police officer antisemitic and that this had been perceived as an insult.

The police operations in the style of a dictatorship were closely coordinated with the Berlin state government and the federal government. In relation to the Palestine Congress, Interior Secretary Christian Hochgrebe (Social Democrats, SPD) announced in advance in the Committee on the Interior that he would “do everything in our power to prevent crimes such as incitement to hatred and the use of prohibited symbols.”

Berlin Mayor Kai Wegner (CDU) thanked the police “for their decisive intervention in this hate event” on Friday afternoon. It had been made clear “which rules apply in Berlin.” Wegner continued:

“We have made it clear that hatred of Israel has no place in Berlin. Anyone who does not adhere to this will feel the consequences.”

Berlin Interior Senator Iris Spranger (SPD) said: “I fully support the decision of the police.” And the Federal Ministry of the Interior led by Nancy Faeser (SPD) wrote on Twitter in the run-up to the congress: “It is good that the Berlin police announced a harsh crackdown at the so-called Palestine Congress in Berlin. We keep a very close eye on the Islamist scene.”

The youth organisations of the SPD, CDU/CSU, Free Democrats and Greens also supported the police operation. In the run-up to the congress, they published a joint statement “against anti-Semitism and the glorification of terrorism” supposedly being promoted by the congress.

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The authoritarian methods used by the German ruling class against the Palestine Congress are inextricably linked to their return to militarism. It is impossible to make Germany “fit for war,” in the words of Defence Minister Pistorius, without abolishing freedom of expression and democracy.

After the United States, Germany is Israel’s largest arms supplier and Ukraine’s largest donor. The government is in the process of shifting billions from the social to the military budget and reintroducing conscription in order to have cannon fodder for further wars. Although it can no longer be denied that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians, the government unconditionally supports the Netanyahu regime and criminalises any opposition to it.

The attack on the congress is directed against the growing opposition to this war policy. According to a recent survey, 69 percent of the population of Germany opposes Israel’s military actions in the Gaza Strip. But the greater the opposition in the population, the more savagely the ruling class lashes out. Dictatorial police state measures are intended to intimidate anyone who rejects this militarist programme.