

Solidarity and humanity!

Grey areas instead of polarisation on the Middle East war

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Bonn, 8 November 2023. The German government's solidarity with Israel is rooted in German history: the genocide of 6.5 million Jews during the Third Reich and the persecution and systematic extermination of Jews and other population groups. At the same time, the horrors of the Holocaust have taught us that the common good is only possible if our actions at home and abroad are guided by humanity and solidarity, regardless of religious, ethnic or gender identity. International law, which evolved significantly after the experience of the Second World War, also focusses on the protection of humanity. Solidarity, humanity and international law must apply equally in the face of the humanitarian and political catastrophe in Gaza.

The lessons of German history and international law could not prevent Hamas from murdering 1,400 people in Israel with its brutal attack. Nor could they prevent more than 10,000 people in Gaza from falling victim to attacks by the Israeli military since then. Both tragedies call into question the observance of international law, but also the much proclaimed values-based German foreign, development and security policy, and our coexistence here in Germany. In domestic and foreign policy, it is important to understand the grey areas beyond the black and white attitudes, especially in view of polarisation: to not condemn population groups across the board; to recognise anti-war voices in Israel as well as the fact that by no means all Palestinians or Arabs support Hamas. The resumption of German development cooperation in Gaza is therefore a step in the right direction.

In view of the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip, Germany's 'unlimited solidarity' with Israel raises the question of its credibility in cooperating with the Arab world. It further undermines our post-Arab Spring promise to Arab populations to support the protection of human rights. These days, Arab civil society organisations are indignantly turning their backs on German foundations and development organisations, and communication channels are shrinking. Voices in other European countries are also calling for Germany to rethink its relationship with Israel.

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When thousands of children are killed and injured, this fuels the already increasing polarisation of international politics. Starting at the global level, tensions between the 'West' and a 'South', however defined, are reminiscent of the Cold War era. This contributes to the hardening of geopolitical fronts, which makes it even more difficult to tackle urgent global problems together in the common interest - from climate change to global health issues.

The way we live together in Germany is also currently suffering from amnesia about history. Attacks on Jewish people and institutions are intolerable and it is shocking that this is increasingly happening again. Anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli blanket condemnations in

the Arab community in Germany are only fuelling polarisation – 'Never again' must remain valid forever. However, stigmatising any expression of solidarity with the suffering of the Palestinian people or criticism of Israel's policies as anti-Semitism misses the point and only contributes to further division. The widespread hostility towards Muslims in Germany identified in a study by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, among others, together with the quasi-ban on public solidarity with Palestine, is currently creating marginalisation and alienation. Peaceful voices among Palestinians and people of Arab descent in Germany are rarely heard.

Germany's security strategy strives to 'secure our values through inner strength'. To counteract all forms of polarisation and instead actively promote social cohesion is a key aspect of this mission statement. After all, history should teach us that common values can only be recognised and defended through dialogue, and that humanity must also transcend political polarisation in order to enable common coexistence. This requires an 'empathetic understanding and recognition of each other's experiences and concerns'.

Being aware of our history means never marginalising based on religion, ethnicity, gender and other markers of social identification. It means being sensitive to human suffering and actively combating it. Solidarity with the victims in Israel shows that, after the terrible experience of the Holocaust, we are attentive to violations of humanity - including those of the people in Gaza and the West Bank.

In view of its historical responsibility, Germany should campaign for an immediate ceasefire and commit to contributing to a long-term political solution to the conflict. Germany can and must help guarantee Israel's security and right to exist - but should also promote the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state and demand compliance with international law from everyone. After all, historical responsibility gives rise to the obligation to stand up for humanity. Only sovereignty, security and prosperity in both communities, Israelis and Palestinians, can support the bottom line of non-violent 'coexistence', and in the long term perhaps also 'togetherness'. In addition to the indispensable military security, it is also important to make allowances for the grey areas.