

The German Way of Securitizing the BDS Movement

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MARTIN BECK, JUN 17 2019

On May 17, 2019, the German federal parliament – the *Bundestag* – passed a resolution in which Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions – the BDS movement – was condemned as anti-Semitic (Deutscher Bundestag 2019; Bennhold 2019). [1] Governmental institutions of Germany are called on not to support any activities of the BDS movement or any groups that are anti-Semitic and/or demand the boycott of Israelis and Israeli companies and products. This unusual move of the parliament, which was endorsed by both the old and new German political establishment – the Christian Union parties (CDU and CSU), the Social Democrats (SPD), and the Liberal Party (FDP) as well as the Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), respectively – requires an analysis based on a Copenhagen School-inspired securitization approach. Securitization refers to speech acts that politicize an issue in an extreme form. In contrast to moves of politicization, securitization dramatizes an issue, presents it as an existential threat or a matter of supreme priority (Buzan et al. 1998: 26), something “which calls for extraordinary measures beyond the routines and norms of everyday politics” (Williams 2003: 514). Thus, securitization aims at legitimizing policies that under normal conditions would not be deemed acceptable. In the following, this article critically discusses the German parliament’s securitizing line of argument and its embedment in German and international politics.

Anti-Semitism in post-World War Two German political culture

Branding a social movement as anti-Semitic is in the political culture of post-Second World War Germany one, if not the strongest, ideological weapon to discredit a political actor. In the era of the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany Konrad Adenauer, and beyond, attempts made by the German political class to work through its past may have primarily been motivated by strategic considerations of becoming a legitimate actor in the emerging ‘Western community of values’ (cf. Gaus 1965: 27–29). Yet, after the student revolts of 1968, the explicit commitment against anti-Semitism developed into an absolute condition for becoming a legitimate political actor in the Federal Republic of Germany. However, paradoxically, it was the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) – the only party in the German parliament that is denied membership of this consensus due to its deficient delimitation of Nazi thought – that made an extra effort to appear to be even more committed against anti-Semitism than the other parties by submitting a counter-resolution that took an even more extreme stand against BDS by calling for a ban of the movement (Bundestag 2019).[2]

Two securitization moves of the German parliament toward the BDS movement

The first of two major moves toward securitization of the BDS movement by the German *Bundestag* comes across rather directly in two simple speech acts (cf. Searle 1969). In the third paragraph of the resolution, anti-Semitism is presented as a “[...] threat [...] to our liberal democratic basic order.”[3] As the German term *freiheitlich-demokratische Grundordnung* is commonly used to encapsulate the entire system of basic values of the constitution, an existential threat to the entire German political system by anti-Semitism is created. The sixth paragraph of the resolution identifies BDS in outright terms as anti-Semitic: “The patterns of argumentation and methods of the BDS movement are anti-Semitic.” Thus, according to the German parliament, BDS constitutes a threat to the political system of Germany.

The BDS movement unequivocally declares that “the BDS movement does not tolerate any act or discourse which adopts or promotes, among others, anti-Black racism, anti-Arab racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, sexism,

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xenophobia, or homophobia” (Palestinian BDS National Committee 2017). This commitment was also re-iterated in the movement’s response to the resolution of the German parliament (Palestinian BDS National Committee 2019). Thus, also given the fact that BDS has not committed criminal attacks against Jews and Jewish institutions in Germany or elsewhere, the question arises as to how the *Bundestag* justifies its dictum that the BDS movement is anti-Semitic. The answer provided in the resolution reads as follows:

“The German federal parliament condemns all anti-Semitic statements and encroachments that are formulated as *supposed* critique toward the *policy of the State of Israel*, but *actually* are the expression of hate toward Jewish persons and their religion [...]” (emphases added).

Apart from reasoning that “[...] the State of Israel, which then is conceptualized as a Jewish collective, can be the target [...]” of anti-Semitism, the *Bundestag* does not further inform the reader about the availability of what methods empower German deputies to unmask “supposed” critique toward Israel as “actual” anti-Semitic hate speech. Instead, the evidence for BDS’s anti-Semitism is solely based on its engagement for boycott appeals against “[...] Israeli commodities and services, Israeli artists, scientists and athletes [...].” This takes the reader of the resolution to the second major act of securitization of the BDS movement by the German parliament, which is again constructed by two simple speech acts: After condemning those who “[...]question the right to existence of the Jewish and democratic State of Israel [...],” the German parliament states that “Israel’s security is part of the reason of state of our country.” From that it can be concluded that BDS challenges Germany’s reason of state.

The ‘evidence’ on which the German parliament’s securitization moves are based

Basically, the argument of the *Bundestag*’s securitization moves against the BDS movement is solely based on the thought that the BDS’s questioning of the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state is fundamentally illegitimate. In the remainder of this analysis, this argument will be critically discussed. Prior to this, it should be stated that major wings of the BDS movement are opponents of Zionism, that is to say the idea of Israel as a *Jewish* state. Yet, significant segments of the BDS movement confine their boycott of Israeli products and institutions to the Palestinian territories that have been under occupation of Israel since 1967, that is, East Jerusalem and the settlements in the West Bank. The *Bundestag* ignores these nuances. Moreover, the resolution states that “‘Don’t buy’ labels of the BDS movement on Israeli products *inevitably* rouses associations with the Nazi slogan ‘Don’t buy from Jews’ [...]” (emphasis added). However, in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 of the year 2016, it is policy of the European Union to differentiate between products of Israel in the pre-1967 borders of 1949 and commodities produced in Jewish settlements in the Israeli occupied Palestinian territories (Council of the European Union 2012). All Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories conquered by Israel in 1967 – that is, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip – were declared illegal by the United Nations Security Council (2016) in resolution 2334.

Chomsky’s and Finkelstein’s critique of the BDS movement

The BDS movement is far from being uncontested among Palestinian activists and social movements promoting self-determination for the Palestinians. In fact, even some icons of the global left and firm critics of Israeli occupation question basic aspects of BDS. A look at some of their arguments is very helpful to better assess the securitization move of the *Bundestag*. In a 2013 interview, Noam Chomsky accuses those wings of BDS that demand a boycott of (cultural) institutions of Israel in the borders of 1949 – such as Tel Aviv University – of being hypocritical and anti-Semitic (Stewart 2013: 45–46). His argument is that crimes committed by the USA are much worse than those done by Israel. Thus, it is hypocritical and anti-Semitic to call for a boycott of Jewish—Israeli institutions and not to target the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT) where Chomsky is a professor.

In contrast to Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein believes that due to the limited capacities of a single activist, it is fine if a person focuses on one unjust issue only. Moreover, in an interview given in 2012, Finkelstein acknowledges that BDS has the right means. However, he denies that BDS has the right goal, as it does not believe in acknowledging Israel in the borders of 1949 (Barat 2012: 5–10). Like Chomsky, Finkelstein also accuses BDS of being hypocritical, but for different reasons: As a movement demanding the implementation of international law, the BDS movement should apply it consistently, which would imply the explicit recognition of Israel in the borders of 1949. Finkelstein

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does not deny the fact that the Palestinian citizens of Israel, who compose roughly twenty percent of the overall population of Israel in the borders of 1949, are discriminated against vis-à-vis Jewish Israelis; however, Finkelstein argues that many states in the Middle East and beyond discriminate against their minorities. Therefore, the demand that they be integrated into a comprehensive solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by establishing a bi-national state (comprising the territories of Israel in the borders of 1949 plus the Palestinian territories conquered by Israel in 1967), as is demanded by some wings of the BDS movement, is not covered by international law. Finkelstein insists that the only way for BDS to get rid of its hypocrisy is to explicitly recognize Israel in the borders of 1949.

The different lines of argument notwithstanding, in regard to the present case, a major joint conclusion may be drawn from Chomsky's and Finkelstein's analyses. By not focusing on the Israeli occupied Palestinian territories, BDS loses ethical credibility and gives leverage to a reactionary actor such as the German *Bundestag* to discredit the whole movement, which is attempting to end a regime of unjust occupation. Furthermore, both Chomsky and Finkelstein criticize that the BDS movement lacks orientation toward the wellbeing of the Palestinians who endure the harsh reality of Israeli occupation. Rather, the BDS movement even tends to harm Palestinians insofar as diehard actors such as the German parliament are provided with a leverage to declare their unconditional support toward Israel without a single word of critique toward Israel's systematic violation of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories. At the same time, it is to be emphasized that Chomsky's and Finkelstein's critical arguments concerning the BDS movement are not available to the *Bundestag*, as the German parliament fails to first and foremost condemn what the two scholars consider to be a crime and basic breach of international law: Israeli occupation policy and American support of it.

Israeli and Jewish scholars against the German parliament's securitization of BDS

The German *Bundestag* passed the resolution against BDS in full awareness of an open letter signed by Jewish and Israeli scholars, many of whom are distinguished academic experts on anti-Semitism. The letter, which was published by the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, unambiguously calls for not equating BDS with anti-Semitism (Algazi et al. 2019). By noting that "many Jewish and Israeli groups either support BDS explicitly or defend the right to support it," the signees of the letter also raise awareness that the German parliament's assumption that critique toward and even rejection of Israel is per se anti-Semitic is highly problematic. In a speech defending her engagement for BDS in 2013, prominent philosopher Judith Butler – who is not a signee of the letter – puts the German parliament's delusion with regard of the equation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism in a nutshell:

[...] the Jewish people extend beyond the state of Israel and the ideology of political Zionism. The two cannot be equated. Honestly, what can really be said about "the Jewish people" as a whole? Is it not a lamentable stereotype to make large generalizations about all Jews, and to presume they all share the same political commitments? [...] If the Jew who struggles for justice for Palestine is considered to be anti-Semitic, if any number of internationals who have joined thus [*sic*] struggle from various parts of the world are also considered anti-Semitic and if Palestinians seeking rights of political self-determination are so accused as well, then it would appear that no oppositional move that [*sic*] can take place without risking the accusation of anti-Semitism" (Butler 2013).

The targeted audience of securitizing the BDS movement

Securitization policies are strategic moves that target an audience. In the present case, the explicit audience is the German government, public German institutions, and in the end German civil society. Yet, what extraordinary measures are to be justified toward this audience? One obvious and explicit aim is to legitimize the deprivation of funding for Palestinian and non-Palestinian civic organizations that peacefully advocate the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Another important extraordinary measure that the German parliament seeks to legitimize is more obscure: Germany, which claims to pursue a value-based foreign policy, extends almost unconditional support for Israel although the repressive occupational regime that Israel has maintained for over fifty years deprives Palestinians of access to basic human rights.

The Israeli government headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu started its securitization policy toward the BDS movement, which he brands as anti-Semitic, more than five years ago (Black 2014; Beaumont 2015). In his

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criticism of this move, Chemi Shalev from Haaretz used as a major argument that Netanyahu talked a weak movement strong (Shalev 2015). German MP Jürgen Trittin from the Green Party, who is among the few critics of the *Bundestag* resolution, sings from the same hymn sheet by stating that “The resolution adds stature to a movement that is loud but small.” Both criticisms are correct in their assessment of BDS as a weak movement in the sense that it has failed to achieve anything tangible for the Palestinians under occupation. However, this critique fails to grasp that both the Israeli and German way of securitizing the BDS movement are – from a power-oriented perspective – smart strategic moves to justify the extraordinary measures of maintaining on the one hand and supporting on the other an occupational regime that blatantly violates human rights.

Conclusion

The resolution launched by the German federal parliament on 17 May 2019, securitizes BDS by portraying it as an anti-Semitic movement that threatens the fundamentals of Germany’s political order and its reason of state. The empirical evidence for this securitization move is very thin, as it rests solely on the thought that questioning the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state is an illegitimate, anti-Semitic act. Yet, by bringing in the criticisms of the BDS movement made by Chomsky and Finkelstein, the paper was able to show how the BDS’s failure to unambiguously acknowledge the right to self-determination of the Jewish people gives leverage to reactionary political actors such as the German parliament to discredit a social movement that demands the implementation of international law and human rights. However, the *Bundestag* is committing a categorial error: Critique of Israeli policy, even in the radical form of anti-Zionism, is the expression of a political opinion that targets a state and its policy, which is fundamentally distinct from anti-Semitism as the expression of racism. Some critics of actors launching securitization policies against the BDS movement blame them for talking a powerless actor strong, thereby overlooking that securitizing the BDS movement comes with a major benefit for the securitizing actors: It enables them to justify the extraordinary measures of maintaining and supporting the occupational regime in Palestinian territories, which systematically prevents the Palestinian people from having access to basic human rights.

Notes

[1] An inspirational source for the present paper has been a statement letter on the German parliament’s resolution signed by sixteen German scholars on contemporary Middle East studies, among them the author of this paper (Muriel Asseburg et al.(2019), “Im Kampf gegen Antisemitismus hilft das nicht,” *Zeit Online*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-06/israel-boycott-bds-antisemitismus-meinungsfreiheit-bundesregierung/komplettansicht>).

[2] The Left submitted a resolution of its own, too, which also condemned the BDS movement.

[3] This and all following German quotes have been translated into English by the author.

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