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## Germany's 'Staatsräson' casts a long shadow on Israel and Gaza

Any criticism of Israel is now seen by some people in power as antisemitic

[GUY CHAZAN](#)



Israeli director Yuval Abraham, left, and Palestinian director Basel Adra speak on stage after having received the Berlinale documentary award for 'No Other Land' in Berlin last month © John MacDougall/AFP via Getty Images

#### **Guy Chazan** YESTERDAY

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It should have been a good week for Yuval Abraham. The Israeli director's film, "No Other Land", about the Israeli army's destruction of Palestinian homes in the West Bank, had just won best documentary at the Berlinale, Germany's biggest film festival.

But suddenly he was swept up in what the Germans call "ein Mega-Shitstorm". In his acceptance speech he had castigated Israeli "apartheid" in the occupied territories. The next day, German politicians queued up to denounce his remarks — and the Berlinale's other expressions of solidarity with Palestinians — as antisemitic.

Things began to escalate. Abraham said on X that he received death threats and a "right-wing Israeli mob" came to his home, "threatening close family members" who were forced to take flight. The Jewish director, enraged at being called antisemitic, said it was outrageous "that German politicians in 2024 have the audacity to weaponise this term against me in a way that endangered my family". "If this is what you're doing with your guilt for the Holocaust — I don't want your guilt," he added.

The Berlinale scandal exposed an uncomfortable truth about Germany: any criticism of Israel is now seen by some people in power as antisemitic. It is an approach that is tying Germans up in knots, inflaming social tensions and undermining the country's credibility in the Global South.

“We are seeing an attempt by certain German politicians to forbid harsh criticism of Israel,” says Meron Mendel, an Israeli academic who heads the Anne Frank centre in Frankfurt. “But you should discuss with people you don’t agree with, not try to shut down the discussion.”

This is not to say that the Berlinale was unproblematic. One prizewinner, wearing a black-and-white keffiyeh, condemned Israel’s “genocide” against the Palestinians. Basel Adra, Abraham’s co-director, talked of Palestinians being “slaughtered and massacred by Israel in Gaza”. Nobody mentioned the 1,200 victims of Hamas’s bloody rampage through Israel on October 7 or the 134 hostages still trapped in Gaza. The next day, slogans such as “Free Palestine — from the River to the Sea” appeared on the Berlinale’s Instagram feed. The festival said its account had been hacked.

The political reaction was as vehement as it was immediate. “The Berlinale was badly damaged this weekend because the antisemitism there went virtually unchallenged,” said Marco Buschmann, Germany’s justice minister. Buschmann zeroed in on the phrase “from the river to the sea”: its use could be interpreted as “approving” Hamas’s October 7 killings. Kai Wegner, the centre-right mayor of Berlin, demanded an investigation into the whole gala evening.

German sensitivity on the subject of Israel is understandable. Guilt over the Holocaust sits deep in the national psyche, and authorities are highly protective of the small Jewish community that has arisen here from the ashes of the Shoah. They are also protective of Israel. Angela Merkel, Germany’s longtime chancellor, was the first to articulate the idea that Israel’s security was Germany’s “Staatsräson”, or in its national interest. Critics say that has become the pretext for unconditional support. “The Staatsräson idea should mean that you support those parts of Israeli society that share your own values,” says Mendel. “It doesn’t help Israel if it means you end up backing a government that is full of right-wing extremists.”

Berlin’s solidarity with Israel has tempered in recent weeks. Shocked by the death toll — more than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since Israel launched its offensive — and the increasing threat of famine, German officials routinely describe the situation in Gaza as “catastrophic”. They frequently call for a humanitarian ceasefire and demand that Israel allow in more aid. But the tendency to shield the Jewish state from criticism is still there.

Witness the reaction of Felix Klein, Germany’s antisemitism commissioner, to the speeches by Abraham and Adra. Artists, he said, were entitled to their opinion. “But the Berlinale should have immediately issued a statement saying that we in Germany

the German government should have immediately issued a statement saying that we in Germany see things differently,” he said. The question for those in power in Germany is whether that different view on the Israel/Palestine conflict is a virtue — or a vice.

[guy.chazan@ft.com](mailto:guy.chazan@ft.com)

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