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VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

With German federal elections around the corner, how will the Jewish community's concerns play out in the voting booth?

HEADING TO ELECTIONS

How will the Jewish community channel its feelings toward the ongoing refugee crisis in Germany and Europe into a political decision?

• ORIT ARFA

The Jewish community in Germany is not necessarily a voting bloc that needs to be catered to ahead of the German federal election on September 24.

Indeed, with an estimated German-Jewish population of about 200,000 (out of 82 million), the Jewish vote won't likely tip the scales in anyone's favor. However, according to one Jewish community organizer, Elio Adler, the Jewish voice should be of particular interest to German leadership.

"I'm always trying to tell politicians that we Jews are good indicators of the condition a society is in," Adler said, over coffee at Potsdamer Platz, near his full-time dental practice.

"We're trained like the 'canaries in the coal mine.' We're trained to feel how open, how democratic a society is, and if Jews are concerned, it should concern the society."

What are the Jewish community's concerns? Adler and his team of supporters – consisting of private citizens, community leaders, politicians, journalists, and clergy – set out to delineate core values of general concern to the German Jewish community through the Werte Initiative (Values Initiative), a position paper available online in English that forms a base of dialogue with German politicians and the Bundestag (parliament).

Images of Albert Einstein, Heinrich Heine and Rosa Luxemburg are among the Jewish German intellectuals that grace the website's homepage, a reminder of the once glorious Jewish presence in the country. The overriding message: Germany must remain steadfast to the liberal-democratic principles of its modern constitution of which Jews are an indelible part.

Adler was born in Germany to a Romanian father who survived the Holocaust and a Russian-German mother who went through an Orthodox conversion to Judaism. The Initiative is an outgrowth of community activism he launched in 2014, during Operation Protective Edge, when pro-Palestinian protesters gathered near the famous Kurfürstendamm boulevard for a rally in which "Jews to the gas" were among the chants.

This antisemitic rally, led and dominated by Arab Muslims in Germany, further cemented his worry over the "radical influx" of Arab Muslims into the country in September 2015, when Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the country's borders to several thousand refugees and migrants stranded at the Hungarian border. The terrorist attack on the Christmas market last December by an asylum seeker, in which one Israeli woman was killed and her husband injured, affected Adler personally. He was contacted by the family in Israel

to locate the couple and came across draconian police bureaucracy that delayed the process.

"We found that there is a special message when the Jewish people tell them to be strong. Jews were always scared of a German state that is too strong, but now we have started to be afraid of a German state that is too weak," Adler said.

Germany should apply the strength of the state to maintaining individual civil rights and liberties, particularly in the face of extremists, he says.

"Our position paper says everyone who accepts values of a democratic life is a part of German society, no matter what skin color, what passport they hold, what religion. It's a pure value-based invitation to be part of this society."

Several months ago, the Values Initiative submitted questions to the major parties regarding eight key issues, some of which directly bear on Jewish concerns, such as Germany's relationship to Israel, the role of the Jewish religion in Germany and attitudes expressed through classic antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Parties that submitted answers include Merkel's CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and its ally CSU (Christian Social Union), the SPD (Socialist Democratic Party), Die Linke (The Left), the Greens, the FDP (Free Democratic Party), and the right-wing controversial, AfD (Alternative für Deutschland).

The answers to Jewish-related questions, available online in German, differed largely in nuance. Nearly all parties praised the return of Jewish life to Germany, acknowledged Germany's special responsibility toward Israel's security, and expressed support for the peace process under the framework of a two-state solution. The one stand-out on Israel was the AfD, which stated that "only the parties involved can find a solution."

This last position does not assure Adler of the AfD's commitment to Israel or the Jewish community. The AfD has been embattled by antisemitic remarks made by some of its local leaders alongside pro-Israel statements by others, rendering the AfD a wild card.

"This is my problem with the AfD. From what I know of these people, I don't trust them. They have an arrogant, nationalist, racist agenda. They are supremacists, and I don't trust such people, no matter what they write."

The Central Council of Jews in Germany, an organized body representing the interests of some 100,000 registered Jews in Germany, appreciates Adler's efforts.

"I welcome the fact that Jewish people are politically committed and their voice is being heard," says Daniel Botmann, the council's Israeli-born director, adding that the body believes that it is important for the Jewish community in Germany to speak with one voice



GERMAN CHANCELLOR Angela Merkel attends an election campaign rally in Quedlinburg on August 26. (Reinhard Krause/Reuters)

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- Elio Adler

on major issues, a role he says it has been fulfilling since its founding in 1950.

Botmann also singled out the AfD as a party of concern.

“The Central Council of Jews in Germany has repeatedly made it clear that the AfD and its representatives cannot be partners for Jewish interests. We strongly reject any attempts to exploit this topic. The AfD is neither an advocate of the State of Israel nor the Jewish community in Germany.”

Another initiative, *Politikerbefragung*, organized by two pro-Israel advocacy groups, Initiative 27 January and Honestly Concerned, is turning to individual candidates with a series of multiple-choice questions relating particularly to Israel.

“It’s a minor voting bloc, but it’s our way of getting pointed answers to topics dear to us,” says Sacha Stawski, director of Honestly Concerned. He shares Adler’s and the council’s concern regarding AfD, and will warn the pro-Israel and Jewish community of what he believes are their faults – including the party’s wish to ban religious head coverings and circumcision among Muslims and Jews alike.

“Even if their responses are wonderful when it comes to antisemitism and Israel, we’ll make a point to add an editorial comment,” Stawski says.

Adler would not reveal who he’s voting for, but he believes that Merkel has learned from her “mistakes,” particularly the handling of the refugee crisis.

“CDU left its core standpoints of being conservative and came closer to the SPD, and that was a problem for them, but they’re slowly moving back. Merkel changed her policies in the last few months in an extreme way, but she didn’t communicate that change effectively,” says Adler.

Among those changes are her negotiation with Turkey to settle migrants there, and the installation of more stringent checks and quotas on those still seeking entry into Germany along with the accompanying social benefits.

ACCORDING TO Eldad Beck, journalist on German affairs for *Israel Hayom* and author of *The Chancellor: Merkel, Israel and the Jews* (Hebrew), the mainstream Jewish community will likely continue to support and vote for Merkel, despite disappointments, based on the strides Merkel has made in strengthening the relationship between Germany, Israel and its Jews.

The Jewish community became more endeared to Merkel after her 2008 speech at the Knesset and other government bodies, in which she claimed Israel’s security is the *raison d’être* of Germany. She was also the first German chancellor to emphatically call Israel a “Jewish, democratic state,” a term that appears in the CDU’s reply to the Values Initiative.

“But then I also had young members of communities saying it’s true that was the case, but two years ago, she took the *Heimat* (home) we found again in Germany by enabling the massive entry of elements from the Middle East that are far from being refugees,” says Beck from his Berlin home, where he has lived for 12 years.

Beck thinks the Jewish community has made a mistake in sidelining rather than engaging in dialogue with the AfD to address the troubling aspects of the party.

“I definitely think some members of the community are seriously considering voting for AfD, but this party is making it extremely difficult for Jews to vote for it. There could definitely be a Jewish protest vote, but most Jews, some even unwillingly, would give their vote to Merkel.”

Merkel’s coalition partner, the SPD, headed by Foreign Minister Sigmund Gabriel, also irked the pro-Israel community. Gabriel made headlines in April when he turned down a meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in favor of a meeting with the left-wing NGO Breaking the Silence.

Beck fears a trend of “GDRization” of relations between Israel and Germany, in which Germany adopts more anti-Zionist policies as-

sociated with the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany) from which Merkel hails.

“He became famous because of the conflict with Israel, which I personally see as a milestone in the relations with both countries because, for the very first time,” Beck claims, “we had clear evidence of German intervention in Israeli internal affairs to such an extent that an official representative of the German government actually preferred meeting with a marginal left-wing organization sponsored by his government than meeting with the democratically elected

‘Most Jews, some even unwillingly, would give their vote to Merkel’

– Eldad Beck

prime minister and minister of foreign affairs.”

In their dialogue with politicians, Stawski’s group will ask SPD members about this incident, but he does not expect them to publicly disavow the actions of their party leader.

Beck had not heard of the Werte Initiative, nor does he believe a German Jewish lobbying effort will affect German policy in any meaningful way.

“It’s unbelievable that more than 70 years after the Holocaust, the Jewish German community still has no influential status, not in politics, not on the social level, not on the intellectual level,” says Beck.

To expand the Jewish voting bloc, Adler calls on some 100,000 German-Israelis to cast their vote, as permitted, and some intend to.

Nathan Peres, an Israeli-German citizen completing his PhD at the Sorbonne University on Jews of Lebanon, crowd-sourced on Facebook for guidance.

“Being so disconnected from Germany for so long makes it hard to make the right choice this year. So I wanted to ask my German friends with a conservative political outlook similar to mine: Who should we vote for?”

He said he ruled out the left-wing parties and the CDU for its handling of the refugee crisis.

“I won’t vote for the AfD, but I don’t dismiss them out of hand because people are demanding me to dismiss them out of hand and that is extremely annoying for me,” says Peres. “I have people on Facebook who tell me if I vote for AfD they will unfriend me.”

Evelyn Bartolmai, an Israeli-German journalist and radio show host on Israeli and Jewish-related topics, will cast her vote early, largely as a protest vote against the new Right.

“There is very strong rightist propaganda, and it’s populist. I also don’t agree 100% with the policy of the refugees. From a humanitarian point of view, I see the necessity to help, but I think they’re making big errors, and if they continue this way, Germany will have a big problem, also from an economic point of view, but I see the Right is using this fear.”

Ideals of social justice, rather than Israel and Jewish-related issues, drive her decision.

“I don’t think antisemitism is an issue. It’s a problem in Germany, but for the elections, for me, it’s not an issue. Of course, I would not vote for an openly antisemitic party.”

Even though the stakes in this election seem to be, by German standards, more dramatic than in previous elections, Peres is not expecting any upheaval.

“I already see a boring election ahead – unless something happens right before it.” ■



CLOCKWISE FROM top left: Elio Adler, a Jewish community organizer in Germany; Eldad Beck, an Israeli reporter on German affairs; Sacha Stawski, director of Honestly Concerned, a Frankfurt-based pro-Israel media watchdog (Courtesy); and Daniel Botmann, director of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. (Thomas Lohnes)