

# Unmasking

**BDS**

*“The BDS Movement... is unacceptable and must be most strongly condemned. The argumentation patterns and methods of the BDS Movement are antisemitic... and inevitably kindle memories of the Nazi era.”*  
(Motion adopted by the German Parliament, the Bundestag, on May 17, 2019)



# An exclusive interview with Dr. Felix Klein

Germany's antisemitism commissioner fights hatred against Jews and Israel

• By ORIT ARFA

**BERLIN** – In 2018, Dr. Felix Klein jumped at the chance to take on Germany's new position of Federal Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight Against Antisemitism. For four years prior, he had served as the Special Representative for Relations with Jewish Organizations and Issues Relating to Antisemitism, so the transition was a natural one.

Contrary to what his last name and position may suggest, Klein was raised in a Protestant household in Darmstadt by a German, Romanian-born father and German-born mother. Klein recalls growing up with Jewish classmates, and his best friend in college was a Canadian Jew. In 1986, he spent a month in Haifa on tour as a violinist and developed a love for Israel, which he visits about twice a year.

Recent headlines suggest that Klein has his work cut out for him.

Antisemitic incidents are on the rise, including a spate of physical assaults against Hebrew-speakers on the streets (mostly by refugees or German nationals of Arab or Muslim descent) and antisemitic bullying in schools. On social media, a once dormant extreme right-wing is rearing its ugly head. The German government itself has come under scrutiny for not doing enough to hold by its national mandate to safeguard Israel's security.

Klein made news on May 25 when he came out in German media recommending that Jews in Germany avoid wearing a kippah in public due to the rise in antisemitism.

"I cannot advise Jews to wear the kippot everywhere all the time in Germany," Klein



▲ Dr. Felix Klein, Federal Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight Against Antisemitism. (Courtesy)

said, adding that he had changed his mind on the subject.

"I made this statement in order to trigger a discussion in the German public about the security of the Jewish community," Klein told *The Jerusalem Post*, saying his statement should be understood more as a call to action. "It is my aim that the German society understands the fight against antisemitism as a common effort. The first step is to raise general awareness of the problem. I came to this opinion after the presentation of the official figures regarding the big increase of antisemitic crimes in 2018, including attacks against persons wearing kippot in public. If we join forces in civil society and in government, I am optimistic that we can successfully fight antisemitism and effectively protect the Jewish community."

In his position, Klein can only make recommendations and leverage his ties with the government to implement programs and changes. In early June, his office set

up a new commission for the fight against antisemitism between the federal government and federal states to push forward issues of prevention and education.

Klein would prefer not to rate what source of antisemitism poses the greater danger: Islamic antisemitism, traditional ethnic right-wing antisemitism, or radical Left antisemitism expressed as anti-Zionism.

"I fight every form of antisemitism; there is no lighter or less dangerous antisemitism," Klein said in an interview at a beer garden located near the German Parliament building. "We have to fight it everywhere. There's a red line and we have to fight it in every form, whether it's BDS or right wing or anti-Zionist. If you make a prioritization, then you immediately get into a discussion of one group played out against the other – that Germans say it's the Arabs, migrants and refugees; and they say it's the right-wingers. That's a useless discussion and I'd like to avoid that."

The German government has adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism which states that denial of Israel's right to exist is a modern-day form of antisemitism.

"Knowledge of that definition is necessary in the police academies; lawyers should know it, and also teachers because it gives orientation," says Klein. "It's legally non-binding, but it's very helpful in raising sensitivity."

However, he believes more has to be done to systematize the application of this definition. Perpetrators of antisemitic attacks – from vandalism to physical assaults – are often not fully known to authorities. In a recent survey, 90 percent of reported antisemitic expressions were attributed to the "right wing," with many cases categorized as such by default.

"There were cases in which police attributed in a demonstration organized by Islamists the showing of the Hitler salute to the 'right-wing' category. I wouldn't put it there."

One of Klein's first call to action was to set up better monitoring and reporting systems to identify sources of antisemitism across the German federal states and to tailor prevention programs accordingly.

"In an area with mainly Muslim perpetrators, we have to intensify our work on integration courses and also with Muslim associations and with the mosques. When we have right-wing antisemitism in other parts, then we have to do more in our political education work."

As for the new Muslim Arab population, which studies reveal carry the antisemitic views of their homelands, Germany's special relationship with Israel, in addition to Germany's democratic values, are already being embedded in integration courses. However, education in the home often competes with that.

"We have the situation, which we cannot really solve, in that many families with Arab backgrounds get satellite television from Arab countries where antisemitic narratives are very common – in soap operas, in news about anything that happens in Israel, and in Gaza and in Ramallah, of course. They have a certain antisemitic bias that's being directly transported to families in Germany, and then often young people take those opinions in schools."

Satellite television cannot be outlawed; however, he is pleased that social media giants are obliged to ban hate speech, according



▲ A kippah demonstration in front of a synagogue in Berlin

(Reuters)

to German legislation.

"The Internet is a major source for it because in real life people traditionally would hesitate to express antisemitic views because they would think that someone would contradict or get resistance. On the Internet, you can post whatever you like, in the beginning at least."

**“When someone says that Israel is an apartheid state, that's antisemitism because 'an apartheid state' by definition cannot be legitimate**

*Felix Klein*

In this case, hate-speech also includes expressions of Islamophobia, which Klein believes is often related to antisemitism: "I think that many antisemites also hate Muslims."

What about antisemitism emanating from Muslims?

"When the antisemitism comes from Muslims themselves, then in most of the cases it's related to Israel."

Klein agrees with the "3D" designation put forth by Natan Sharansky when it comes to differentiating between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitism: Demonization, Delegitimization, and Double standards.

"For me, that is the case when someone says that Israel is an 'apartheid state.' That's already antisemitism because an 'apartheid state' by definition cannot be legitimate."

As a non-partisan appointee by the Merkel government, Klein enjoys the luxury of critiquing the German government itself across political parties. It recently come under scrutiny for what are perceived as anti-Israel attitudes or measures. These include funding of NGOs with proven ties to BDS; Germany's voting patterns in the United Nations when it comes to Israel; and Germany's insistence on holding on to the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

On May 17, a parliamentary vote tempered





Germany 1939



Paris 2019

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some concerns. Backed by Chancellor Angela Merkel's governing coalition consisting of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democrats (SPD), along with the Free Democrats (FDP) and the Greens in the opposition, the Bundestag adopted a non-binding anti-BDS resolution which called the movement antisemitic, a move praised by Israeli leaders and the pro-Israel and Jewish community.

“The vote is a strong political statement against the BDS movement, condemning its aims and methods as clearly antisemitic,” Klein said, days after the vote. “In the future, no event with BDS-involvement will be tolerated on the premises of the Bundestag. We will now have to find a feasible way how the federal government should implement the decision of the Bundestag.”

Klein is thankful that BDS – which the government now officially considers a permutation of the Nazi-era boycott of Jewish goods, is not as widespread a phenomenon in Germany as it is in other countries.

“I would welcome if other European countries adopted similar measure,” he said.

In a more controversial vote in March, the Free Democrats (FDP) issued a parliamentary motion aimed at curbing German voting

patterns in the United Nations condemning Israel. All political parties aside from the FDP and the right-wing AfD (Alternative for Deutschland) voted against it, with the governing coalition citing improper parliamentary protocol as the reason for the negative vote. Klein said this does not reflect the government's lack of commitment to Israel.

“I understand the criticism. I'm very unhappy that the FDP motion didn't have a majority vote because of parliamentary rules.”

Regarding Iran, Klein is fully aware of the nuclear ambitions of the antisemitic regime. “We think the JCPOA would be a possibility to contain that. I know that Israel is against that and we don't know how the story would end. So the methods are different, but I also think we should be aware of the danger of Hamas and Hezbollah gaining ground here in Europe and also in Germany.”

As for the German government's hesitation to label Hezbollah's “political wing” as a terrorist organization, such a matter – including that of labeling products made in Jewish areas of the West Bank – is a pan-European issue.

“Personally, I think it's very difficult to define the difference between a political and military wing of an organization. Germany

is not alone in the world; there is a European discussion about that. It would be better to have a common European position regarding that matter. I know the discussion is not finished.”

Germany must also carefully monitor funding to NGOs in the Palestinian territories as well as textbooks of UNWRA-based schools.

“It's a big problem for everyone, not only public but private partners. I think we have to stop accepting funding when there is an organization that is openly against the right of Israel to exist. That's unacceptable.”

In German civil society as well, media, schools, and universities should examine portrayals of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that may subtly or outright demonize Israel.

At the end of the day, Klein doesn't want to dwell only on the negative, such as the portrayal of Jews as Nazi victims and current day victims. He's encouraged by the flowering of Jewish institutions and culture (and Israeli restaurants, as an Israeli food lover) throughout Germany.

“What's effective is to increase knowledge of Judaism in Germany – to raise awareness that Jewish culture is an integral part of our diverse German culture, and whoever attacks that attacks the whole culture.” ♦