

Response of BDS Austria to the Cancellation of Facilities for an Event of the Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) 2017 by the WUK

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We admit it – sometimes we are simply bewildered.

It is not the cancellation of already agreed and paid for facilities on the part of the WUK (“Werkstätten- und Kulturhaus,” i.e. an alternative cultural center in Vienna) that astonishes us. Sadly, this has become almost routine in the global North for BDS groups and other organizations that promote solidarity with Palestine (e.g. by the Amerlinghaus during the IAW 2016). Nor is it surprising that the WUK, which describes itself as “self-administered” and independent, and aims to offer space for meeting, discussion, and experimentation, has to rely on subsidies of the city of Vienna to accomplish its goals, and can therefore – just like the Amerlinghaus – be kept on a short leash when politically required. As a result, reasonably forward-looking activists in Europe and the USA plan for a fallback facility even before they approach an “alternative” center.

There is however one difference between the cancellation of agreed facilities for the IAW 2016 and IAW 2017. Last year Green and Social Democratic politicians had to subject the Amerlinghaus to a great deal of pressure and to even threaten the cancellation of subsidies before the steering committee of the Amerlinghaus, against their will and angered by their powerlessness, was forced to yield.[1] With astonishing unity, delegates to Parliament, representatives of the FPÖ, ÖVP, and individual SPÖ and Green representatives mobilized against the IAW 2016 through OTS Press Releases and a counter-demonstration.[2]

This year, however, without any great pressure, the WUK, in an Email to BDS Austria of March 2, 2017, rushed to “unequivocally distance itself from the ‘Israeli Apartheid Week 2017’ and its organizers, BDS Austria, and declares that it does not offer space for any kind of anti-Semitism or its expression (...) In the case in point, the use of a room was promised to BDS because the assurances of the organizers that they stood for equal rights, against oppression and against anti-Semitism were erroneously found credible (sic?).”

What does astonish us is that an organization that sees itself as a political and cultural center, and that until recently offered spaces to the international Left, would allow itself to make such a superficial, indifferent, and politically inadequate statement.

Of course, we initially communicated transparently and openly that BDS is denounced and subjected to criticism throughout the world by apologists for Israeli Apartheid. In some countries this has been accomplished through denial of facilities, closing of bank accounts,[3] and attempts to criminalize BDS.[4] In France, there have been violent attacks by the extreme-right Jewish Defense League.[5]

Naturally, we also made it clear that, just as the beginnings of the South-African anti-Apartheid movement, BDS arouses reactionary counter-currents. We explained that we see these counter-currents as sign of the legitimacy and of the potential of our initiative to produce social changes. To

this, we received the reply that the WUK is used to resisting a certain amount of such blowback as long as it came from the FPÖ.

However, the WUK's position changed once we officially announced the Israeli Apartheid Week 2017, and publicized their facilities as the venue for two of the events in the program. The announcement resulted in the WUK receiving a barrage of furious Emails and angry complaints from well-known opponents of BDS. This so-called "shitstorm" had blown for only two days when the WUK's steering committee buckled, and accused BDS, or rather BDS Austria, not merely of malicious deception, but also of harboring anti-Semitic motives. All that without mentioning the worldwide controversy surrounding the "Israeli-Palestinian conflict," examining the actions and positions of BDS, or asking us for a response to the accusations and thereby giving us the opportunity to disprove these slanders.

That bewilders us. It bewilders us that those responsible for the WUK demonstrate the clueless arrogance to defame an international human rights campaign as anti-Semitic in a casual subordinate phrase, and to simultaneously slander its worldwide supporters including people of color and civil rights organizations, people such as Angela Davis, Greg Thomas, Alice Walker, Desmond Tutu, and the Movement for Black Lives, Jewish intellectuals, scientists and activists such as Judith Butler, Naomi Klein and Ilan Pappé, as well as a growing number of Jewish groups and organizations, such as Jewish Voice for Peace and activists of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), artists such as Roger Waters, Ken Loach, Brian Eno, etc. and countless other unnamed activists.

It bewilders us that the WUKs officers defame the three demands of BDS as anti-Semitic, even though their implementation would lead to the dissolution of BDS, and the fact that they completely accord with binding international law and human rights standards. The BDS demands are:

- ending the occupation and colonization of Palestinian territory and dismantling the wall;
- recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality;
- respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.

It bewilders us that the Israeli Minister of Justice, who is directly responsible for illegal house demolitions, "legally" justified ethnic cleansing, the torture of prisoners, the internment and deportation of African refugees, and who posted an open call for genocide of Palestinians on Facebook during Israel's attack on Gaza in 2014, is allowed to pontificate about "Protecting Human Rights While Countering Terrorism" at the University of Vienna without objection and after receiving a reverential invitation. All this took place even as the BDS movement in Austria is demonized, defamed, and, by use of double standards, deprived of public spaces and thus of any possibility of a public discussion. The event was protested only by the activists of BDS and Women in Black (Vienna), a letter to the faculty of law (Juridicum) authored by the Styrian Peace Platform and four other Austrian organizations that promote peace, human rights, and international understanding, as well as an open letter of 350 signatories including world-renowned intellectuals." [6]

Liberal western states and societies no longer need official censors, nor do they practice censorship in the traditional sense. Far-right student associations and racist parties such as the FPÖ can, in spite

of all the protests and demonstrations, and, moreover, excused by the Green President, Van der Bellen, continue without hindrance to dance and discuss in palaces, and to invite their far-right Knesset allies for debates about anti-Semitism.[7] Warmongers can give lectures at the University of Vienna or incite a military intervention against Iran (aka “Stop the Bomb”)[8] and alternative centers such as the Amerlinghaus and the WUK can permit controversies on the Left. All that is allowed as long as Israel’s settler colonialism and Apartheid regime are not mentioned. Whenever a pluralist system functions in this manner, there is no need for censorship – at least not censorship from above or outside. Self-censorship, in anticipatory obedience, a la WUK suffices: freedom of expression and peaceful activism in about Israel-Palestine is sacrificed to avoid any danger to the (fragile?) consensus.

Not least, the official student organization at the University of Vienna (ÖH Uni Wien), the future academic elite of this country, felt obliged to publish a statement against the Israeli Apartheid Week, which is taking place worldwide, including in Austria.[9] They complain that BDS inter alia calls for an academic boycott of universities and academics, and thus threatens “academic freedom“ and, of course, demonstrates its anti-Semitism. But that these universities, and academics are demonstrably and most closely intertwined with the Israeli military and the Apartheid system, and thus deserve a boycott, goes unmentioned or is (purposely?) disregarded. ÖH Uni Wien prefers instead to allege, without citing cases or sources that BDS calls for the boycott of individuals, who teach or study, and harasses them. This claim is false, the BDS boycott does not target individuals; it only targets institutions that cooperate with or profit from Israel’s occupation and apartheid policies. Moreover, the student representatives of the largest university in Austria, which is also the largest in the German-speaking world, ignores, with well-know elitist arrogance, the most recent appeal that the students of Gaza directed to their counterparts throughout the world: Take part in the International Apartheid Week. Israel’s ten-year-old blockade that systematically seals off the Gaza Strip denies those studying or teaching there any possibility of international communication, even as it robs all residents of Gaza of freedom of movement. The Palestinian Student Committee in Gaza writes, “Most of us were expelled (from historic Palestine) by what later became the Israeli army. As students, we are not allowed to attend a university in the West Bank, not to mention to visit our families, who live there or in Israel. The Israeli blockade deprives us of basic goods, including schoolbooks. The electricity blackouts force us to read by candle light ...” and they tell of the after-effects of the Israeli war-crimes of 2014. According to a UN report (and others), these will, in a few years, make Gaza – already the biggest open-air prison in the world – uninhabitable.[10] In view of this, we ask ourselves: What assaults is ÖH Uni Wien speaking of? Certainly, it is not of those a powerful Apartheid state inflicts on the people under its blockade and occupation.

We are bewildered by the elitist, racist, presumptuous cowardice and complicity of the largest Austrian student organization, by alternative centers that give in to the blackmail of subsidy denial through anticipatory obedience, by Austrian politicians and ministers of the SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, and the Greens, who see Israel as a model for “fighting the refugee crisis”[11] or maintain a sublime silence, and by the silent majority of our society that do not appear concerned by these matters.

The worldwide BDS campaign is supported and promoted in Austria by many individuals and organizations, including the AIK (Antiimperialist Coordination), OKAZ (Austrian Arabic Cultural Center), Dar al Janub (Union for Anti-Racist and Peace Initiatives), Women in Black (Vienna), The

Arabic Palestine Club (APC), the Association of Palestinian Doctors and Pharmacists, and the Palestinian Cultural Forum “Handala.”

We do not dare to hope that this open letter will move those responsible for the WUK or the Amerlinghaus to reconsider their policies or decisions, nor that the other parts of the internationalist Left will find the courage to support the worldwide BDS campaign. We gain hope and courage from the many people in Austria, Europe, and around the world, who with a clear view of the future, support the BDS movement, because it demands nothing more than observance of the most basic human rights. We are guided by the encouraging words of Gaza’s students:

“No matter what you face, take courage from us and we will take hope from you. You, more than anyone, are in a position to act, so let the truth of justice roar across your campus and beyond“

Footnotes:

[1] In a telephone call with the Amerlinghaus it was reported that the donors in the city government even spoke of the threatened fall of the „Red-Green“ coalition government in Vienna if the Israeli Apartheid Week event took place in the Amerlinghaus.

[2] See

http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160307_OTSO090/offener-brief-an-buergermeister-dr-michael-haeupl-die-stadt-wien-sowie-die-verantwortlichen-im-amerlinghaus
http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160307_OTSO187/fp-lasar-fordert-klare-positionierung-gegen-antisemitismus-in-wien
http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160307_OTSO156/juraczka-weiterer-skandal-rund-um-das-amerlinghaus http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160307_OTSO203/stellungnahme-des-vorstandes-des-vereins-kulturzentrum-spittelberg-amerlinghaus
http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160308_OTSO007/bds-austria-reagiert-mit-pressekonferenz-auf-antisemitismus-vorwuerfe-und-auf-den-rauswurf-aus-dem-kulturzentrum-amerlinghaus <http://derstandard.at/2000032463177/Wiener-Amerlinghaus-sagt-israelkritische-Veranstaltungen-ab> http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160311_OTSO052/aviso-11031600-uhr-ikg-ruft-zur-kundgebung-gegen-antisemitische-bds-kampagne-auf
<http://wien.orf.at/news/stories/2761657/>

[3] See

<http://www.juedische-stimme.de/?p=2022> <http://www.taz.de/!5366334/>
<https://at.icej.org/news/headlines/commerzbank-schlie%C3%9Ft-bds-konto>
http://diepresse.com/home/wirtschaft/economist/4981420/Erste-Bank_Kein-Konto-fuer-IsraelBoykott <http://bds-kampagne.de/2016/02/29/exklusiv-bds-kampagne-bedankt-sich-bei-der-jerusalem-post-und-benjamin-weinthal/>

[4] See

<http://www.juedische-stimme.de/?p=1966> <http://bds-kampagne.de/2016/12/08/erklaerung-von-rechtsgelehrten-fuer-das-recht-auf-bds/>

[5] See <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160601-leader-of-frances-jewish-defence-league-on-run-in-israel-after-conviction-in-paris/> https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Defense_League <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/asa-winstanley/jewish-defense-league-mob-attacks-paris-journalists> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2693423/Jewish-vigilantes-rampage-Paris-attack-pro-Palestinian-demonstrators.html>

[6] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yC0Oj7jqWY>
<https://twitter.com/univienna/status/831824383744290816>
<https://openlettervienna.wordpress.com/open-letter-to-the-university-of-vienna/>
<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/video-protests-disrupt-vienna-talk-israeli-genocide-advocate-ayelet-shaked>

[7] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nptfv4s2J6c&t=186s>
https://www.falter.at/archiv/FALTER_201611092BFCECF868/wieso-referiert-die-fpo-uber-antisemitismus-herr-peham

[8] <http://derstandard.at/3325045/Analyse-Eine-Konferenz-als-Roadshow>

[9] See <http://www.oeh.univie.ac.at/aktuelles/stories/oeh-uni-wien-spricht-sich-gegen-israeli-apartheid-week-von-bds-aus> <https://www.vice.com/alps/article/antideutsche-strukturen-in-der-oeh>

[10] <http://mondoweiss.net/2017/02/palestinian-students-apartheid/>

[11] See <http://derstandard.at/2000052561191/Sobotka-sieht-Israel-bei-Grenzschutz-als-Benchmark>
<http://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5118280/Doskozil-holt-sich-in-Israel-Tipps-zur-Grenzsicherung> <http://derstandard.at/2000050018655/Staatssekretaerin-Duzdar-reist-nach-Israel-und-Palaestina>