

Dreaming of a “free Palestine”: Muslim Youth in Germany and the Israel-Palestine Conflict

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The recent war in Gaza has provoked much concern about an “import” of tensions from the Middle East to Europe. Yet, the perception of this conflict among young Muslims and immigrants does not exclusively derive from the actual events in the Eastern Mediterranean, but has as much to do with these youngsters daily life in Berlin, Paris or London. In the recent years, the conflict has turned into a metaphor that allows rallying for Muslim unity against injustice. As an identity marker, “Palestine” has entered Muslim youth culture in Germany – and in Europe in general – to symbolize a shared struggle against discrimination of Muslims and attacks against Islam.

“Palestine – built to last” – the Germany based online-shop *comuni-t* chose this label for one of its t-shirts. “I dream of a free Palestine” goes another slogan sold on the website of *muslim-shirt*, a small street wear label based in the provincial town of Wuppertal. These online-shops aim at providing “street wear for the umma”¹, the borderless community of Islam, and cater to a younger generation of Muslims that since the late 90s slowly emerged in various European countries. As representatives of “Pop-Islam” as this trend has come to be known in German debates on contemporary Islam, these youngsters stand for a simultaneous assertion of Muslimness *and* a belonging to Western societies. The self-confident description as “Muslim, young and German”² is popularized by organizations such as the *Muslim Youth in Germany*, just as slogans like “Muslim and British” and “Muslim and French” echo similar patterns of identity among Muslim youngsters in the UK or France.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides an opportunity to foster these believers’ identity and to rally for Muslim unity and communal action. The protracted conflict in the occupied territories, i.e. West Bank and the Gaza Strip has been an important focal point among immigrants with Middle Eastern and Turkish background in Europe for long time. While immigrants from Israel/Palestine, who have personally experienced the consequences of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, represent only a minor segment of European Muslims, the persisting conflict with Israel continues to impact on public opinion among Muslims and Middle Eastern immigrants. The so-called al-Aqsa-Intifada (2000-2005) was a case in point.³ With numerous public events and large rallies in major European cities, the conflict drew considerable attention among immigrants and beyond. Coinciding with the repeated violent escalations of the conflict as the Israeli offensive on the Palestinian refugee camp Jenin in April 2002, the

¹ See the website: comuni-t.com. (accessed on Apr. 15th, 2009)

² See the website of *Muslim Youth in Germany*: mjd-net.de. (accessed on Apr. 15th 2009)

³ Another occasion that received broad attention was the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the *nakba*, the “catastrophe” provoked by the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Dozens of events were organized in 2008 throughout Germany in memory of the expulsion and flight of some 700.000 Palestinian-Arabs. With regard to Shiites, the annual *Quds Day* manifestations on the last Friday in the month of Ramadan are important occasions to rally for the “liberation” of Jerusalem. The *Quds Day* was initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979; with regard to the ideological background of the event and its echoes in Germany, see Wolter, Udo: *Beispiel Al-Quds-Tag. Islamistische Netzwerke und Ideologien unter Migrantinnen und Migranten in Deutschland und Möglichkeiten zivilgesellschaftlicher Intervention* (Berlin, 2004).

protests culminated in massive demonstrations, often leading to tensions between local Muslim and Jewish communities in Paris, Amsterdam or Berlin. According to an EU report on manifestations of antisemitism in Europe in the period between 2002 and 2003, the height of the fighting in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, young Muslims with immigrant background appeared for the time among identified groups of perpetrators of anti-Jewish attacks.⁴

The war in Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009 added to the importance of the conflict in popular perceptions among Muslims and Middle Eastern immigrants, with observers again pointing to growing agitation and an increasing number of anti-Jewish incidents.⁵ While anti-Jewish stereotypes and the spread of antisemitic resentment among Muslim youngsters are increasingly identified as a considerable problem, the origin of this phenomenon remains disputed. During the Gaza war, news reports about the impact of the tensions in the Middle East for Europe again made the headlines, as Europe supposedly “reimports Jew hatred” from the “Arab street” in Gaza, Cairo and Damascus.⁶ In this respect, a possible impact of Arab and Islamic media such as the TV-channels *al-Jazeera* and *al-Manar* – a Lebanese channel affiliated to *Hizbullah* – was frequently highlighted.⁷ Yet, the image of an “import” or “spill-over” of tensions from the Eastern Mediterranean ignores the local contexts in which the protests against the war and the widespread identification with the population in Gaza are placed, and neglects these protests’ local significance. While the events of the war and the high number of civilian victims were the ultimate trigger for the massive protests, these manifestations also illustrate the search for a collective identity in which many of the participating youngsters are engaged. Posing as a member of a larger Muslim community that is under attack, the protests reflected a considerable frustration and discontent about this youth’s standing in German society.

⁴ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia: *Manifestations of Antisemitism in the EU 2002-2003* (Vienna, 2004): 20-22. See also AMIRA: „Du Opfer!“ – „Du Jude!“ Antisemitismus und Jugendarbeit in Kreuzberg (Berlin, 2009) and Amadeu Antonio Stiftung: „Die Juden sind schuld“. Antisemitismus in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft am Beispiel muslimisch sozialisierter Milieus (Berlin, 2009).

⁵ See for instance Banks, Martin, “Rise in anti-Semitic incidents across EU linked to Gaza crisis”, *The parliament.com*, 2 March 2009.

⁶ „Europe Reimports Jew Hatred“, *Wall Street Journal*, 13 Jan. 2009.

⁷ See „Schäuble verbietet Hisbollah-Sender Al Manar“, *telepolis.de* (Nov. 25th 2008).

“Palestine” and lifestyle

Since the first days of the war in late December, members and sympathizers from various Muslim and immigrant organizations joined in the protests against the massive attacks on Gaza. While various organizations with non-immigrant and non-Muslim background supported the calls for demonstrations, many of the rallies and events were initiated by Muslims and/or immigrants of Arab and Turkish background. Ranging from the secular-oriented organization of the *Palestinian Community in Berlin* to the moderate Turkish-Islamist *Islamic Community Millî Görüş*, the rallies brought together tens of thousands of participants from different ends of the political and religious spectrum. Even fringe groups such as the Islamist grouping *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, though outlawed in Germany since 2003, and several associations with Salafist orientation took part in the protests, often joining the rallies that were organized by mainstream Muslim actors. One of the striking features of these activities was the prominence of youngsters among the demonstrations’ participants. The interest of young Muslims to engage in rallies and the concern and anger voiced on these occasions mirror the topicality of “Palestine” in informal discussions among peers, in daily life and lifestyle. Yet, these references to Palestine do not necessarily allude to the actual Israeli-Palestinian conflict; in fact, knowledge about the actual conflict and its historical background is often scarce.⁸ Instead, in many statements and expressions that were made during these protests, Palestine had turned into a metaphorical trope whose implied meaning largely exceeds an allusion to the numerous victims and large-scale destruction resulting from the repeated confrontations with the Israeli army. While Muslims have become victims in major wars and military conflicts of the recent past, it is the Palestine conflict that has turned into a symbol for the plight of the Muslim community and Islam. While the numbers of Muslim victims in the wars in Algeria (1991-2002), Bosnia (1992-1996) and Chechnya (1994-1996 and 1999-2006) – and in the ongoing genocide in Darfur – were considerably higher than in the Palestinian territories, it is this conflict that has gained most, and near exclusive, attention. Given the religious importance of Palestine and Jerusalem in particular in Islamic tradition, the allusion to “Palestine” serves as a strong marker of one’s religious identity.

⁸ See for instance Arnold, Sina/Jikeli, Günther, *Judenhass und Gruppendruck – Zwölf Gespräche mit jungen Berlinern palästinensischen und libanesischen Hintergrunds*, in: Benz, Wolfgang (ed.): *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 17 (Berlin, 2008): 105-130. The significance of the conflicts in the Middle East – and the Palestine conflict in particular – for Islamist currents in Germany is highlighted in The Change Institute: *Studies into violent radicalization. The beliefs, ideologies and narratives* (London, 2008): 79-80.

That said, repercussions of the confrontations in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank can be traced in Muslim youngsters’ daily life. Similar to the online-shop *comuni-t*, the German-Muslim lifestyle label *Styleislam* has taken up the recent conflict and produced t-shirts and buttons calling for an end to the fightings in Gaza.⁹ The motive “Gaza: Stop the killing now” is one of few slogans touching on explicitly political issues; in contrast, most other motives entail a straight forward religious message: “Hijab. My right, my choice, my life”, “Read Quran. Charge your Iman (faith)” and “Umma – be part of it” read some of these slogans that allow both identifying as believers and calling others to Islam. (see Pic. 1) In this, these motives clearly mirror the message the producers want to transmit, with “Palestine” symbolizing a shared – though rather abstract – concern of the label’s audience. In its self-description, the label states:



Pic. 1: *Styleislam*: “Go spread the word”

“Our label *Styleislam* stands for modern lifestyle products in the street style and casual wear-sector, always with a touch of the Orient, because this is where our roots are. We design clothes, but that’s not all, we also offer music tracks and videos by and for our brothers, sisters and interested people. A multimedia product package with style and character – just the thing for the young Islamic community. The sketches, motifs and slogans on our products are not only funky, they also have content. We communicate Is-

⁹ The motives of the label are also available as avatars, used as icons of virtual identity in community networks such as *Facebook*. Among the accessories sold on the website are mouse-pads, see styleislam.com. (accessed Apr. 13rd, 2009) The significance of the conflicts in the Middle East – and the Palestine conflict in particular – for Islamist currents in Germany is highlighted in The Change Institute: *Studies into violent radicalization. The beliefs, ideologies and narratives* (London, 2008): 79-80.

lam in a language young people can understand, without sacrificing our values in the process. *Styleislam* – go spread the word.”¹⁰

The appropriation of street culture to stage one’s religious identity and to voice the message of the Quran is one of the characteristics of *Pop-Islam* as expressed in the trend linked to these labels. Being cool and street-credible, while at the same time submitting to traditional Islamic values and norms, has gained this current considerable attention among young Muslims of diverse backgrounds. As such, many of these trends, labels and websites stand for modern Islamic lifestyles that are not limited by national boundaries; as in the case of *Styleislam*, most of these exponents of Muslim youth culture explicitly address a larger Muslim audience in Europe, as well as in the Arab and Islamic world. Their message is directed as much to local German, British or Danish audiences as it is meant to appeal to the transnational Muslim *umma*.

References to “Palestine” are part of the community construction in these currents – with music being an important facet of this youth culture. During the last few years, Islamic hip-hop and pop has emerged as a major stage for Muslim artists to voice their views and visions and to raise issues important to Muslim youngsters. Even groups such as the Danish trio *Outlandish* that is not exclusively of Muslim background frequently raise religious issues and consider their music a venue to address religious concerns and to voice religious messages. Other bands and singers such as the German hip hopper Ammar114 explicitly view their music as part of *darwa*-activities, the “invitation” of others to Islam, which is considered a religious obligation in conservative and Salafist currents.¹¹

The label “7th century record” is an example of such music, with “Palestine” featuring as a key topic in its productions. The label, which is promoted by the UK-based project *Muslimrap* and linked to in German-Muslim internet sites and online communities, describes its aim as

“raising awareness and consciousness regarding the state of our world today through the medium of music, song, hip hop and poetry. With this goal in mind, and to inform as well as to entertain, our label has embarked

¹⁰ styleislam.com. (accessed Apr. 13rd 2009)

¹¹ See interview with Ammar114 in [Islamische Zeitung](#) (May 21st 2008). For an insight into the history and the religious background of Islamic hip hop, see Mohaiemen, Naeem: *Fear of a Muslim Planet: The Islamic roots of hip-hop* (MIT Press, DJ Spooky ed., 2008).

on a conscious initiative to tell the story of Palestine through creative and artistic musical expression of the facts, truths, the lies, pain and hope that is Palestine today.”¹²

The CD-compilation “Palestine – The album” matches these intentions. While many of its songs address the hardship and suffering of the Palestinian population, the allusion to the situation in Palestine is not limited to humanitarian concerns. The song “Jenin” (Cataclysm) that refers to the Israeli military operations in the Palestinian refugee camp in April 2002 exemplarily depicts the experience of the conflict as a challenge to devout believers. Pointing to the city in the West Bank, the song’s lyrics include an imagined dialogue that highlights a spiritual importance attributed to this place:

“I give you one name that means so much to me: Jenin.’ [You might ask:] ‘Jenin?! Jenin is just place in Palestine.’ ‘I tell you: No. Jenin is a place that makes me wanna be a better believer, everyday a better believer.”¹³

While many of the groups promoted on *Muslimrap* address an audience of Islamist orientation – with bands such as *Soldiers of Allah* being tied to the Islamist movement of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* – other Muslim groups reach out to a mainstream Muslim public. As an example, the British singer Sami Yusuf has gained considerable popularity in Germany, with his Azeri background contributing to his renommé among youngsters with Turkish family backgrounds. Following his two previous albums, “Al-Muallim” (“The Teacher”) and “My ummah” (“My community [of believers]”), that had been sold in several millions of copies, his most recent album again focuses on religion and his experience as a Muslim – with the song “Forever Palestine” explicitly addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yusuf focuses in the song on the role of children in the confrontation with the Israeli army and uses them as an illustration of the Palestinian struggle as a righteous one before God, but also against tyranny as such. While the Palestinian side might have to temporarily submit to the power of Israel’s military strength, it is God himself who will “put the oppressors right” and re-establish justice. Palestine, here again, stands for a larger cause Muslims have to struggle for:

“Children of Palestine are fighting for their lives. They say to their parents, ‘we know that Palestine is our right’. They say to their parents, ‘we’ll fight

¹² See a description of the project on the website muslimrap.net. (accessed Apr. 13rd 2009)

¹³ The song is available on the website muslimrap.net. (accessed Apr. 13rd 2009)

for what is right’. They say, ‘not to worry! God is on our side’. They say, ‘we’ll die for Palestine’. Palestine, forever Palestine.”¹⁴

The importance given to “Palestine” as a topos is mirrored in Yusuf’s participation in a fundraising event for the victims of the Gaza war that was organized in Doha (UAE). Being described on his website as “devoutly spiritual” and as aiming at “promoting the messages of love, mercy, peace and tolerance, whilst encouraging the youth to be proud of their identity”¹⁵, Yusuf implicitly depicts the struggle for “Palestine” as a key element of today’s Muslims’ concerns.

Belonging and political action

Important in this respect is the use of modern media as facilitating the formation of identificational bonds around shared interests and preoccupations. Calls for demonstrations in protest of the Gaza-war circulated in dozens of German-Muslim online forums and received considerable attention by its users. In addition, fundraising events were organized by various organizations and attracted much support through mailing-lists and cross-postings on weblogs and in chat-rooms; online-forums such as the popular *Shia-Forum* and official websites of organizations such as the *Islamic Community Millî Görüş* contributed to gather support for these charity events. Yet the online-installations created by *Islam-Online* in *Second Life* might stand most exemplarily for the mounting importance that is attributed by major Muslim actors to online media for enhancing Islamic activism. The creation of a “Palestinian Holocaust Memorial Museum” by *Islam-Online* – a popular religious online counseling service supervised by the controversial Egyptian-born Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi – made the case of Palestine part of the virtual world of young technic-oriented Muslims.¹⁶ While the virtual site was meant to provide information about the ongoing conflict and to denounce the Israeli offensive, it also offered facilities to donate for the Palestinian population and to join an international campaign against the war (see Pic. 2).

¹⁴ See the website Samiyusuf.com. (accessed Apr. 13rd 2009)

¹⁵ See the website Samiyusufofficial.com. (accessed Apr. 13rd 2009)

¹⁶ Palestinianholocaust.net. (accessed Apr. 13rd 2009)

While, for the time being, the actual use of *Second Life* among Muslim youngsters remains limited, the efficiency of cyber activism in the name of Islam became visible during the recent war in Gaza. Depicting the use of the internet for the cause of Islam as the “jihad of our era”¹⁷, even conservative



Pic. 2: “Palestinian Holocaust Memorial Museum” in Second Life

clerics as Qaradawi have turned to the web for Islamic teaching and lobbying for causes considered crucial to Muslims in the Islamic world, but in Europe as well. In this respect, the broad dissemination of calls to boycott Israeli products is particularly striking. While calls for boycotts have since long figured prominently on some Muslim websites, social community networks such as *Facebook* and *StudiVZ* have significantly extended their potential audience. Among the calls that were circulated on German-Muslim websites during the war in Gaza, attacks against two major supermarket chains, *Aldi* and *Lidl*, achieved most attention. Claiming that the revenues of these companies were to be transferred to Israel, a short text message was posted in slight variations in online-forums, mailed in mass-emails and forwarded as SMS. One of these SMS read: „On January 10th, do not go shopping at *Aldi* or *Lidl*! The money will be donated to Israel! Please tell others! This information is from a brother who works as a *Aldi* branch manager!”¹⁸

In addition, several self-made videos were published on *Youtube* and *MySpace* to spread the information and to call people to refrain from shopping in the concerned supermarkets. While the accusations were soon criticized by some Muslim internauts as ridiculous, the rumor was obviously taken for real by many users; the massive dissemination of the rumor within the period of few days – with the same rumor also

¹⁷ Bettina Gräf, „IslamOnline.net: Independent, interactive, popular“, *Arab Media & Society* (No. 4/2008).

See also Abdallah El-Tahawy, “The internet is the new mosque. Fatwa at the click of a mouse”, *Arab Insight* (Winter 2008): 11-19.

¹⁸ See „Aldi, Lidl, Israel und die große Spendenaktion“, *musafira.de* (9. Jan. 2009).



Pic. 3: „Are you still watching, or did you already get started to help?“ Cultural event organized by Islamische Denkfabrik in support of the Palestinian population in Gaza

believers and fostered the belonging to the *umma*. These allusions to “Palestine” clearly identified this community as a community under attack: It was not only for the population in Palestine that these protests were perceived, but for Muslims as such. The Gaza war thus provided an exceptional opportunity to mobilize the collective and to appeal to the believers to contribute to the cause of the *umma*. (see Pic. 3) Hence, the organization of fundraising events and the collection of donations were not limited to charity, but appeared as part of a religiously sanctioned collective action against injustice and oppression. Echoing this perspective, Qaradawi explicitly insisted that donations to the population in Gaza were not due to humanitarian considerations; for him, these donations were a clear and unconditioned religious duty.²⁰

¹⁹ See “Kritik am Aufruf zum Boykott von Aldi und Lidl”, ufug.de (Jan. 10th 2009).

²⁰ See his statement on *Al-Jazeera* (Jan. 25th 2009). The vast majority of Muslim voices in Germany that joined the protests did not imply any support for violent activities in solidarity with the population in Gaza. Yet, in some cases, and from within *Salafist* groupings in particular, the recent conflict in Gaza was used to glorify martyrdom in the name of Islam and to appeal to the “manhood” of Muslims in face of the attacks against Islam. See “Märtyrer und Paradies. Eine salafitische Stimme zum Krieg in Gaza”, ufug.de (Jan. 17th 2009).

A striking feature of these activities in support of Palestine is the frequent link to the local conditions of Muslims and, though less often, immigrants in Germany. On many occasions, protests against Israel’s politics in the West Bank and Gaza are painted in colors of a broader struggle in defense of Islam and religious sentiments. In this respect, claims of an one-sidedness of mainstream German politics and media towards Israel regularly featured in statements issued during the protests. While differing in extent and consequence, the suffering of the population in Gaza appears as reflecting a general attack on Islam that also tends to victimize Muslims in Europe. While perceiving Germany as a “hostile society”²¹ that denies basic religious freedoms to Muslims and discriminates against them in schooling, the labor market and daily life, many Muslim youngsters thus face a dilemma. Even those youngsters who have been born in Germany and/or who do not necessarily consider themselves as Muslim are often identified as “Muslim” and “foreigners” by German mainstream society; while these youngsters see themselves as Germans, they are identified by their non-immigrant and non-Muslim surrounding with Islam. Irrespective of their actual integration into German society, these youngsters are often labeled as a priori different. In this context, identification with non-Muslim society is considerably undermined, as became evident in a comprehensive study on the beliefs and opinions of Muslims in Germany: about two third of the young Muslim respondents felt “rather” or “only” bound to the country of origin of their parents,²² with religion and religious identity becoming an increasingly important concern among adolescent Muslims.

The identification of youngsters with Arab or Turkish family background with a larger Muslim community and its supposed natural causes echoes this distance to mainstream society – and the discrimination and rejection they encounter within it. Some 36 % of young Muslims thus share the view that Muslims are rejected by Germans.²³ Such assessments of discrimination might in some cases reflect projections and ideologically distorted perceptions of non-Muslim society; yet numerous studies on the image of Muslims and immigrants in German society have consistently documented the considerable support for anti-Muslim views articulated in private conversations,

²¹ The Change Institute: *Studies into violent radicalization. The beliefs, ideologies and narratives* (London, 2008): 98-100.

²² Brettfeld, Katrin /Wetzels, Peter: *Muslimen in Deutschland. Integration, Integrationsbarrieren, Religion sowie Einstellungen zu Demokratie, Rechtsstaat und politisch-religiös motivierter Gewalt* (Berlin, 2007): 220.

²³ Brettfeld, Katrin /Wetzels, Peter: *Muslimen in Deutschland. Integration, Integrationsbarrieren, Religion sowie Einstellungen zu Demokratie, Rechtsstaat und politisch-religiös motivierter Gewalt* (Berlin, 2007): 240.

but also in parts of mainstream media and public debates.²⁴ According to a recent study conducted among German youth, nearly two thirds of the non-immigrant respondents considered the number of immigrants in Germany as too high.²⁵ Support for openly racist stereotypes even in mainstream spectra of society is also discernable through the popularity of explicitly anti-Muslim websites that in recent years have strongly influenced public debates on Islam. With German-language weblogs such as *Politically Incorrect* attracting up to 40.000 visitors on a single day, the entries and comments published on these sites echo massive – and often violent – resentments against Muslims and Islam.²⁶

Conclusion

Being discriminated against – both as a Muslim and an immigrant – is an experience that many Muslim youngsters describe as being part of their daily life. In this regard, the conflict in Palestine for many appears as a symbol for a larger attack against Islam and the Muslim community. The identification with the cause of the Palestinians, often depicted as a just cause against injustice and oppression, allows fostering a sense of belonging to a larger collective. Interpreted as a religious duty in solidarity with fellow Muslims and in defense of Islam, the protests against the Gaza war in December 2008 and January 2009 were thus not limited to solidarity with its victims, but echoed a general discontent and sense of marginalization in Germany itself. In addition, the taking to the streets in protest against the war and engaging in grassroots initiatives in support of the Palestinian population should be seen in the context of the tight limits imposed on these youngsters’ political participation. With many of them being deprived of political rights, “Palestine” provides an effective stage to mobilize and to become an active subject in local public debates. Yet, this form of activism should not be mistaken for actual influence and an active role in public life. In fact, the anti-war protests of Muslims did not bring together “citizens”, but “Muslims” – defined as members of a

²⁴ See for instance: Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes: *Diskriminierung im Alltag. Wahrnehmung von Diskriminierung und Antidiskriminierungspolitik in unserer Gesellschaft* (Heidelberg, 2008): 68-72 and Leibold, Jürgen/Kühnel, Steffen: Islamophobie oder Kritik am Islam, in: Heitmeyer, Wilhelm (ed.), *Deutsche Zustände Folge 6* (Frankfurt/Main, 2008): 95-115.

²⁵ Baier, Dirk/Pfeiffer, Christian/Simonson, Julia/Raubold, Susann: *Jugendliche in Deutschland als Opfer und Täter von Gewalt* (Hannover, 2009): 113.

²⁶ Shooman, Yasemin: Islamfeindschaft im World Wide Web, in: Benz, Wolfgang (ed.), *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung 17* (Berlin, 2008): 69-96.

religious community with a shared communal identity that does not necessarily match with mainstream society. As such, many of these protests did not necessarily aim at changing the situation in Gaza, but at staging communal loyalty and action.