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Jewish People in the German Far-Right: How AfD is Pandering to Jews to Gain Legitimacy

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ABSTRACT

Despite the consistent rise of anti-Semitic attacks, Jewish people from across Germany are joining the far-right Alternative für Deutschland political party in increasing numbers. In 2018 a group of nineteen Jewish AfD members formed the JAfD, the Jewish division of the party, reflecting just how much Jewish support for the AfD is growing even as national and global Jewish organizations have branded the AfD as anti-Semitic. This growth comes as a shock considering incidents like AfD politician Wolfgang Gedeon's denial of the Holocaust and accusations that numerous AfD politicians encourage extremist behavior. This paper examines the AfD's official policy statements to understand how Jewish-Germans can merge their political beliefs with the AfD's German nationalist position. This paper argues that the AfD has deliberately re-structured its platform to appeal to a Jewish base, which enables party heads to challenge allegations of extremism in a bid to gain mainstream legitimacy.

KEYWORDS

antisemitism, German parliament, right-wing populism, xenophobia

1. INTRODUCTION

Before the formation of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), electoral success of right-wing parties in Germany was restricted to a regional level. In wake of the Eurozone crisis and former Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to bail out Greece, longtime Christian Democratic Union members Konrad Adam, Alexander Gauland, and Bernd Lucke broke with the party to form the political group Wahlalternative 2013 (literally Alternative Choice), which then formally became the political party Alternative für Deutschland in February of 2013. Wahlalternative originally operated under the umbrella association *Free Voters* but left the alliance before the 2013 election to become the AfD and took the more radical stance of advocating to abolish the Euro (Pop, 2013).

The initial focus around abolishing the Euro and the return to Deutsche Mark attracted working professionals, economists, and politicians. The party tried to distance itself from the far right and instead align with an interpretation of classical liberalism, but German media still debated whether the AfD was conservative or actually further right on the political spectrum. In the September 2013 elections, the AfD failed to garner over 5% of the vote, which prevented it from entering the Bundestag, instead earning only 4.7%. German media speculated as to whether this electoral failure would bring about the end of the AfD (Spiegel, 2013).

Prior to the 2014 election, Bernd Lucke was elected lead candidate and the AfD re-configured its image at a party conference in January 2014. In the May 2014 election, the AfD won 7.1% of the vote, finishing in fifth place (European Parliament, 2019). At the 2015 AfD party conference, Lucke lost the party's presidency to Frauke Petry, a former chemist and businesswoman who espoused anti-immigrant sentiment as a response to spikes in refugee admittances (Wagstyl, 2015). Lucke quickly resigned from the party and the change in leadership signaled a pivot from the AfD as a single issue party to a strong association with broader right-wing platforms. AfD's current manifesto reflects the ideological pivot in 2015. The Manifesto for Germany is strongly nationalistic, euroskeptic, and xenophobic. The party is currently led by Tino Chrupalla and suffered a loss in the September 2021 German election, winning only 10.3% of the vote, a decline from the previous election's 12.6%. The AfD has maintained a loyal base in East Germany and dominates Saxony and Thuringia (Schultheis, 2021).

Germany has a small Jewish population of roughly 118,000 total citizens. Antisemitism surged across Europe in recent years and Germany is no exception; in 2020, German police data showed that antisemitic crimes rose by more than 15% (Barakat, 2021). At less than .02% of the German population, parties do not have an inherent electoral need to pander to the Jewish vote. Despite Germany's warm relationship with Israel, antisemitism is still on the rise, which reveals a disconnect between the German government's formal relationship with Israel and the tension between Jewish Germans and the general population. More recently, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called for a new nuclear agreement with Iran and diverged in response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett (Cheslow, n.d.). These developments echo the essential center-left view towards Israel—the willingness to continue an amicable partnership without taking an aggressive stance on any Israeli position, most meaningfully the Iran nuclear deal.

The AfD has been accused of antisemitism on numerous occasions. In 2016, AfD Baden-Wuerttemberg state parliament representative Wolfgang Gedeon made national news after referring to the Holocaust as “certain misdeeds” (BBC, 2016). A 2020 study by Monika

Hübscher of the *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism* found that the AfD used Facebook to spread antisemitic posts to rally its base prior to the 2017 German election (Hübscher, 2020). Despite such displays of antisemitism, Jewish Germans are joining the AfD in increasing numbers. In October 2018, 24 Jewish AfD members formed the Jews in the AfD organization, nicknamed the JAfD (DW, 2018). The Central Council of Jews in Germany was quick to criticize the founding members of the JAfD. President Joseph Schuster commented, “Of course, Jews don’t just make smart decisions” (PNZ, 2018). The majority of prominent Jewish organizations in Germany made similar statements that fall lambasting the founders of the JAfD and claiming that the AfD is undoubtedly antisemitic.

In the September 2021 German election, Marcel Yaron Goldhammer, a gay Jewish man with dual citizenship of Israel and Germany, ran on the AfD ticket in Berlin. Goldhammer’s prominence in the AfD along with the formation of the JAfD demonstrate the growing Jewish support within the AfD.

2. AfD MOTIVATIONS IN INCREASING JEWISH VISIBILITY WITHIN THE PARTY

The right has not seen much success in Germany since the fall of the Nazi regime. Precursors to the AfD including the Nationalist Front, the German Alternative, and the National Offensive were all banned. These right-wing groups were banned after being labeled as neo-Nazi by the German government. The unsuccessful history of Germany’s contemporary right makes it clear that right wing groups must distance themselves from the legacy of the Nazi party if they want to maintain legitimacy in the public eye. An effective way to accomplish this goal is by including and increasing the visibility of German Jews, the historical victim of right-wing Germany. As Marc Grimm outlines in the *European Journal of Current Legal Issues*, the AfD attempts to thwart comparisons to Germany’s history of right-wing fascism by orienting themselves as friends to the Jewish community (Grimm, 2019).

Another important reason for this new alliance is that far-right narratives perceive the Jewish State as the last European frontier against Arab powers (Rose, 2020). This appears to underlie the AfD particular affinity for Israel, which is unmatched by any other German political party. In May of 2020, AfD politician Joachim Kuhs used a picture of Yair Netanyahu, son of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a graphic with the AfD branding and logo (Sales, 2020). Regardless of past instances of antisemitism, the AfD presents itself as uniquely aligned with Israel. As Rose outlines, this affinity for Israel stems from the desire to align a potential mutual hatred against Islam.

The population of Muslims in Germany has steadily increased since the early 2000s with an estimated 5.3–5.6 million people as of 2020 (BAMF, 2021). In 2015, over one million people migrated to Germany from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The German people have not necessarily welcomed Muslim and Middle Eastern migrants with open arms. A 2016 survey found that almost two thirds of Germans believe that Islam does not belong in Germany (DW, 2016). Islamophobic crimes have risen in the past years. In 2020, the German police recorded 901 anti-Muslim hate crimes, an upward trend from 884 in 2019 (Simsek, 2021). The AfD capitalizes on these fears and directly addresses the rising Islamophobia among Germans. In the AfD’s manifesto for Germany, the party voices its support for freedom of religion, but clarifies that these freedoms must exist “within the limits of public laws, human rights and our value system” (AfD, 2014).

The AfD justifies the opposition to Islam by proposing the notion that Islam is in conflict with Germany’s legal system and aims to thwart societies within Germany that utilize sharia law. This is a unique jab at Germany’s court system which uses elements of Sharia

law in private instances. In Kassel, for example, a federal court cited Islamic law in a ruling which required a widow to share her late husband's pension with his second wife (Spiegel, 2010). Other key points of contention include ending foreign financing to mosques, closing Islamic schools, and banning the use of the burqa, similar to France's 2011 banning of face coverings.

3. JEWISH MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING THE AfD

The case for Jewish membership in the AfD is peculiar. It is hard to discern why Jewish people are aligning themselves with a nationalist party that advocates for Germany as an ethnically and religiously homogeneous state. While AfD motivations for courting Jews have been addressed by numerous articles, the question as to why Jews are attracted to the AfD is largely undiscussed.

Attributing Jewish membership in the AfD to the AfD's embrace of Israel cannot possibly be the entire answer. Angela Merkel of the CDU had a legacy of warm relations with Israel and is portrayed positively by major Israeli publications, including the *Jerusalem Post* and *Haaretz*. Chancellor Olaf Scholz of the SPD is continuing the legacy of Merkel through maintaining warm relations with Israel. As aforementioned, these parties do not take as hard of a stance in endorsing Israel as the AfD, but Germany's main parties are certainly not at odds with Israel. That being said, it is unlikely that Jews join the AfD simply because the AfD has Israel's strongest supporter.

The more probable answer lies within the tensions between Arabs and Jews within Germany. Tensions rose in 2018 after a video of an Arab man lashing a Jewish man wearing a kippah went viral on German social media (Local, 2018). Tensions rose even more sharply after the 2018 death of 14-year-old Susanna Feldmann, who was murdered by a 21-year-old asylum seeker from Iraqi Kurdistan. The crime is not necessarily antisemitic because it is unlikely Feldmann mentioned her religious background to her attacker, but the tragedy caused outrage among Germany's Jewish population as Feldmann was a part of Mainz's Jewish community (Afra, 2018). The annual al-Quds day march in Berlin is also a source of provocation. Many attendees display the flags of Hamas and Hezbollah, which is perceived as an act of agitation (Liphshiz, 2019). Thus, it could be hypothesized that the appeal of the AfD for some Jews might lie in the AfD's islamophobia and xenophobia. However, any conclusion in this direction would be purely speculative at this point, as there is no data on Jewish attitudes towards Muslim immigrants in Germany and the political opinions of Jewish-Germans are not investigated in any meaningful capacity.

4. CONCLUSION

The rise of Jews in the AfD disproves the notion that there is no such thing as the Jewish vote within Germany—a narrative pushed heavily in German electoral politics. “There is no data on what Jewish voters are interested in as a group, no survey. . . Jews are part of overall society and. . . they vote on different issues,” said Dalia Grinfeld, the director of European affairs for the Anti-Defamation League (Axelrod, 2021). The increasing Jewish interest in the AfD suggests that Jews are attracted to certain right-wing positions, and the assumption that there is no correlation between the Jewish ethno-religion and voting statistics may turn out to be wrong. It also means that the Central Council of Jews incorrectly perceives German Jews as a generally liberal monolith. It would be naive to say that there are no voting trends within the Jewish community, but it is equally ingenuous to assume that all Jewish Germans will typically vote for the center-left. Rather than invalidate the feelings of those joining AfD,

it might benefit the Council to try to understand what motivates them. If the intention of national Jewish organizations is to draw Jews away from right-wing parties, these organizations cannot simply lambast participants. There must be an investigation into the shortcomings of the center left and an understanding into what issues Jewish Germans think the AfD is able to confront effectively.

Similarly, the German center-left government has much to gain from analyzing the demands of Jewish voters and understanding what uniquely motivates Jewish Islamophobia. Even if the Jewish population constitutes a small minority, the Jewish German population holds a distinct power to legitimize alt-right movements because of Germany's Nazi past. For the foreseeable future, the German litmus test to political legitimacy for far-right parties will be a comparison to the Nazi party, and Jews, the foremost victims, resultantly will have an elevated role in adjudicating matters of hate. Therefore, the most significant conclusion is that if the German government intends to curb right-wing extremism, they must start collecting data on Jewish political perspectives so that the Jewish electorate is not used as a mechanism to provide legitimacy to parties like the AfD.

Lastly, it needs to be mentioned that there is a certain irony to the newly formed alliance between the AfD and the Jewish community. The narrative that the AfD pushes to slander Arabs and Muslims has parallels to the Nazi portrayal of Jews. The Nazi party presented Jews as an existential threat to Aryan society. Likewise, the AfD perceives the presence of Muslim and Arab cultural practices as a clear threat to the fabric of contemporary German society. The alliance between the AfD and Jews is the AfD's implicit acknowledgement that Jewish people, once viewed as parasitic, are valid Germans who contribute positively to German society. It is ironic that in the eyes of the AfD, Jews are not part of an ethnically Christian German state but are still welcome, while Arabs and Muslims are seen as a detriment to the state. This paradox calls into question whether AfD leaders are merely opportunists who are willing to align themselves with Jews for political benefit even if it complicates their core ideology.

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