



PERSPECTIVES

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Can Organized Jewry in Germany Behave “Normally?”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Recently, about 20 Jews created a Jewish section in Germany’s right-wing populist and anti-Islam AfD party, prompting a dramatic reaction among the German Jewish community. Seventeen Jewish organizations came out against the Jewish AfD group. Yet the greatest threat to the Jewish community’s future in the country resides not with AfD but with the mainstream parties, the CDU and the SPD. Their joint governments have let in millions of immigrants, many of whom are anti-Semitic Muslims.

Jews fulfill many functions and roles in European societies. For many centuries they served as scapegoats for majority populations, and anti-Semitism has long been an integral part of European culture. The Jews’ symbolic role as quintessential stranger has declined since the massive influx of Arabs and Africans into Europe, as has their characterization as somehow “exotic.”

Jews are often early indicators of societal problems. Regular verbal and physical attacks on Jews by Muslims have drawn attention to several of the many problems brought into Europe by significant segments of these immigrant groups. In the wake of the Holocaust, new roles have emerged. These include the Jew as the typical victim and Jews as the benchmark of society’s morality on some issues.

The murder of Jews by a Muslim in a Paris supermarket in January 2015 made more French Jews reflect on the idea of leaving their country. Manuel Valls, who was PM of France at the time, said: “France will not be France without the Jews.” The underlying message was clear: If Jews increasingly leave France because they feel threatened, a factor legitimizing French democracy would begin to disappear.

President Emmanuel Macron has also said that the experiences of French Jews can be indicators of the country's overall wellbeing. At the annual dinner of the CRIF, the French Jewish umbrella organization, in March 2018, he said that anti-Semitism is the "opposite of the republic" and the "dishonor of France."

The legitimizing role Jews have been assigned with regard to societal issues is most prominent in Germany. Since the 1990s, German governments have allowed Jews from Russia to immigrate into the country even though those immigrants had no historical connection with it. That influx numbered around 200,000, which made them by far the largest group in terms of origin in German Jewry.

The symbolism of Jews living in Germany is palpable. If Jews are increasingly present in the country despite its horrendous past under the Nazi regime, one can infer that Germany has become a "normal" democracy. This has led to occasional proud declarations that Germany is the only European country with a growing Jewish population. In recent years, Germany's organized Jewry has been shrinking; it now numbers fewer than 100,000.

Nowadays, on average, four anti-Semitic incidents are reported per day in "normal" Germany. There are strong indications that the real figure is substantially higher. Official statistics falsely attribute almost all attacks to right-wing perpetrators, a fallacy that was exposed by the country's Anti-Semitism Commissioner, Felix Klein. He said physical attacks against Jews by Muslims are far more numerous than what is recorded. Still, distorted statistics continue to be published.

A rather insignificant recent event seemed to perturb the supposed "normalcy" of Jewish existence in Germany. About 20 Jews created a Jewish section in the right-wing populist and anti-Islam AfD party. None of these people held positions in major Jewish organizations, but the German Jewish community was nevertheless aghast. Seventeen Jewish organizations came out against the Jewish AfD group. That is tantamount to almost one Jewish organization for each of its members. The umbrella organization, the Central Council of Jews in Germany, called the AfD "racist and anti-Semitic." That may be true for some of its leaders, but not for all of them, and certainly not for a sizable proportion of its voters.

Partly due to the overreaction of organized German Jewry, the initial meeting of the small Jewish AfD group garnered major national media interest. It might have been sufficient if the umbrella organization had issued a statement simply stating that a few individual Jews do not represent the community at large.

Since the September 2017 elections, the AfD has been the third-largest party in the German parliament and thus the main opposition. It currently attracts about 15% of voters. The AfD is shunned by all the other parties, who accuse it of having racists and

neo-Nazis in its midst. The AfD is presented as purely negative, creating the false impression that all the other parties are purely positive.

Yet there are signs that some Christian Democrat (CDU) politicians want to collaborate with the AfD. In Meissen, a town in the Federal State of Saxony, elections for the mayoralty took place in September 2018. In the second round, the AfD candidate withdrew in favor of the Christian Democrat, who was elected.

The CDU lost heavily in the 2017 parliamentary elections, and their support in the polls has declined even further. Thus additional breaches of the boycott of the AfD can be expected in order to hold onto power in some locations. (The same pattern has already been seen with the Socialists [SPD], who have entered into coalitions with the extreme leftist party, die Linke. Die Linke has many former communists in its ranks.)

The Jewish AfD group's initiators invited Beatrix von Storch, the deputy chair of the party's parliamentary faction, to their opening meeting. She said that for many Jews, Muslim anti-Semitism is a big theme. She added that for those people, the AfD is a natural home. She also said the AfD is open to Muslims.

If one analyzes the German reality, it is not the AfD that has created the greatest threat to the future of Jews in the country. The huge shadow over Germany was caused by the mainstream parties, the CDU and the SPD. Their joint governments let in millions of immigrants without much selection in recent decades, the majority of whom are Muslim.

In percentage terms, anti-Semitism is far more present among the newcomers than it is among the locals. It is also more extreme. A recent study on anti-Semitism in Bavaria mentioned that a Muslim told his Jewish neighbor that he had taken his children out of a Muslim school because it was teaching that Jews should be killed. What regular school in Germany teaches anything close to that?

Yet the Jewish organizations that came out so forcefully against the small group of Jews in the AfD were far less vocal about this major influx, which represented a huge threat to the future of their members. The small organized Jewish community, slightly over 0.1% of the country's population, should not be in the forefront of the battle against the AfD.

There is yet another indirect negative for Jews from non-selective immigration and the subsequent criminal acts committed by some of the immigrants: the extreme right-wing, which represents the greatest and longest-lasting threat to German Jews, has received a major shot in the arm.

Jews will continue to be bellwethers of many important developments in German society, which remains far from "normal." The impact of the major immigrant influx has prolonged that abnormality for years to come.

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