



## **Whitewashing Achille Mbembe's Antisemitism**

**by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld**

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,601, June 9, 2020

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The African public intellectual Achille Mbembe was invited to be keynote speaker at this summer's Ruhr Triennale music Festival in Germany (canceled due to coronavirus). His invitation was questioned due to his history of making extreme antisemitic statements. Mbembe claims, falsely, that his opponents were members of the extreme right who didn't want a black speaker. A debate has ensued in which his supporters are demanding the firing of Germany's antisemitism commissioner, Felix Klein. The Mbembe affair is one of the most aggressive campaigns to whitewash antisemitism seen in recent years.

Achille Mbembe is a public intellectual from Cameroon who has taught at a variety of prestigious universities. He currently holds a position at Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg.

Mbembe is an extreme anti-Israel inciter. Nevertheless, he was invited to be keynote speaker at this year's Ruhr Triennale, a musical and cultural festival in Germany. The event was scheduled to take place in August and September of this year.

The first opponent of Mbembe's invitation was Lorenz Deutsch, the cultural spokesman of the liberal FDP party in the parliament of the German federal state of North Rhine Westphalia. In late March, Deutsch wrote an open letter to Stefanie Carp, the festival's artistic director, asking her to disinvite Mbembe. (Carp was also criticized in 2018 for inviting a BDS-supporting group to a music festival.) Deutsch pointed out that Mbembe has written that Israel's behavior toward the Palestinians is worse than South Africa's treatment of the black population under apartheid. Mbembe is also an academic supporter of the BDS movement, which demonizes Israel. Deutsch noted that in 2018, North Rhine-Westphalia banned public funds for institutions that provide BDS activists with a platform. He also mentioned

that Mbembe was one of about 300 signatories on a 2010 petition calling for the University of Johannesburg to cut all ties with Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel.

A major attack on Mbembe was written by Alan Posener, an editor at the national daily *Die Welt*. In his piece, "Enough Tax Money for Anti-Israel Inciters," Posener noted that in a 2016 essay, "The Society of Enmity," Mbembe declared that Muslims and blacks are the Jews of today. Mbembe also wrote that Israel's policy in the occupied territories is a laboratory for a worldwide policy of control, monitoring, and excluding black people.

Posener, like Deutsch, cited Mbembe's claim that Israel's policy toward the Palestinians is worse than apartheid. Mbembe wrote that Israel has a "fanatic policy of destruction which aims to turn the life of the Palestinians into a pile of trash which has to be cleaned. In South Africa, the rubble piles never reached those dimensions."

Mbembe denied the charges in an email to the national daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*.

On April 23, Posener doubled down with an article entitled "The Three Major Untruths of the Israel Hater," which used Mbembe's self-defense as a case study. Mbembe employed three arguments: first, that the accusation of antisemitism infringes academic freedom and freedom of thought; second, that he can't be an antisemite because his arguments are based on the thoughts of Jewish thinkers, including (the highly controversial) Hannah Arendt; and third, that he has every right to criticize Israel because Israel's actions are so despicable. In addition to these three standard tropes, Mbembe added the issue of post-colonialism. Posener described Mbembe's defense as sloppy, stating that the only issue at stake was whether a man like him should be keynote speaker at the Ruhr Triennale.

NRW Minister of Culture Isabel Pfeiffer-Poensgen said she doubted whether Mbembe's invitation was in line with the state parliament's 2018 decision against BDS. She fully condemned "all boycotts against Israel" and convened the supervisory board of the Ruhr Triennale to discuss the matter. Carp's contract, which was set to expire later this year, was not renewed.

German antisemitism commissioner Felix Klein also came out against Mbembe's invitation. Klein told the WAZ (Funke Group) on April 15 that the keynote speech for such an important festival should not be delivered by someone known to diminish the Holocaust. He noted that Mbembe has contested Israel's right to exist and compares Israel to apartheid South Africa,

“a well-known antisemitic motif.” Klein said a major speech by Mbembe at a festival that received public money would cause political damage.

The Mbembe quandary became a non-issue at the end of April, when the festival was canceled due to coronavirus. The cancellation was convenient for the board of the festival, which no longer had to make a decision about Mbembe’s invitation, but the story was not to end here.

A large number of antisemitism whitewashers—many of them very aggressive—have come to Mbembe’s defense. Toward the end of April, Andreas Görgen, Director of the German Foreign Ministry Department for Culture and Communications, tweeted at least seven posts in support of Mbembe.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Associate Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC), said the German FM should launch an investigation into those tweets. He added that the SWC is considering including Görgen’s actions on its list of top 10 antisemitic and anti-Israel activities of 2020. FDP parliamentarian Frank Müller-Rosentritt questioned the foreign office about Görgen’s tweets, but the ministry gave an evasive answer.

German and international scholars wrote a letter declaring their solidarity with Mbembe, but a second letter was far worse. In that letter, Jewish teachers at Israeli and US universities and artists—many of them well-known Jewish condemners of Israel—wrote to German Minister of the Interior Horst Seehofer claiming 1) that Mbembe is not an antisemite; 2) that BDS is not antisemitic; and 3) that Klein should be dismissed as antisemitism commissioner.

This remarkable triple assault is an unusually extreme example of an antisemitism whitewash.

Several Jewish and civil society organizations in Germany addressed an open letter to Seehofer in Klein’s defense. They were backed by Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME), an organization representing 50,000 academics.

Uwe Becker, state antisemitism commissioner for Hessen and mayor of Frankfurt, also supported Klein. He said, “Mbembe’s bigoted comparisons of apartheid with the Holocaust, his negative portrayal of Jews going back to the 1990s, and his completely one-sided criticism of Israeli politics have contributed to the defamation and delegitimization of the Jewish state.” He condemned the campaign to have Klein removed, which, as he noted, itself contains antisemitic motifs.

In the midst of all this, it emerged that Mbembe threatened to withdraw from a conference at South Africa’s Stellenbosch University in 2018 because a

leading Israeli psychologist was among the invited speakers. Professor Shifra Sagy of Ben Gurion University was subsequently disinvited.

On May 8, 2020, Mbembe placed an article in French on his Facebook page entitled "The Moral Conditions of the Struggle Against Antisemitism" that also appeared in the extreme left German daily *TAZ*. In the piece, Mbembe delivered a set of insinuations in response to the accusations of antisemitism that followed his invitation to the Ruhr music festival.

First, he claimed he was the object of a completely unfounded, crazy sneak attack from German right wingers. This is false. The attacks came mainly from mainstream German society, as well as local and international Jewish organizations.

Second, he rather shrewdly manufactured dark suspicions about Lorenz Deutsch, the local politician from North Rhine Westfalia who was the first to publicly question his invitation to be keynote speaker. "I have been asked whether [Deutsch] has any connections to neo-Nazi circles or ultra-nationalists," Mbembe wrote. "I don't know anything about that."

In his third insinuation, Mbembe wrote, "[Deutsch] could not say that he did not want a Negro at the Festival...so he found something better. He had a demonic idea: an antisemitic Negro.... for Deutsch the idea is unbearable that a Negro can think for himself and have moral viewpoints."

Antisemitism is color-neutral. There is no antisemitism premium or discount depending on the color of the antisemite's skin. In the very article in which he denies his antisemitism, Mbembe admits that he signed a call to break off relations with Ben-Gurion University.

Mbembe is but one of a number of prominent antisemites in the black community. The leading antisemite in the US is Louis Farrakhan, an African American. The French black comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala is a serious contender for the title of France's leading antisemite. ADL studies have found that African Americans remain considerably more likely than white Americans to hold antisemitic views.

On May 10, Jürgen Kaube, publisher of the national daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, wrote that those who defend Mbembe generally do not refer to his antisemitic statements. Instead, they focus on the alleged aims of those who do point out that his antisemitic views exist.

Kaube cited German historian Thomas Weber, who drew attention to a travelogue Mbembe published in 1992 under the title "Israel, the Jews and Us." In that piece, Mbembe presented the Holocaust as an event in the history

of colonialism and Israel as a massive betrayal of the Jewish experience of persecution. Mbembe claimed that Israel was “taking the place of the murderers” and called the God of the Jews a God of vengeance. In 2015, Mbembe wrote that Israel’s goal is the incremental obliteration of the Palestinians.

A few days after Kaube’s piece appeared, 337 scientists and artists from 30 countries published a letter protesting “political interference aimed at silencing advocates of Palestinian rights guaranteed under international law.” Among them were well-known Jewish Israel-bashers, including Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, and Amos Goldberg.

On May 18, a letter was published whitewashing Mbembe’s antisemitism. It was signed by more than 700 African scholars and artists. The letter was addressed to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Walter Steinmeier. It started by employing Mbembe’s first lie, mentioned above: “We, African intellectuals, thinkers, authors, and artists, condemn without any reserve the lying antisemitic accusation of extreme right, hostile to foreigners, and right-wing conservative groups in Germany against Professor Achille Mbembe.” This letter, like the earlier one, also demanded the dismissal of Antisemitism Commissioner Felix Klein.

In an interview with *Die Zeit* on May 20, Klein explained why he had condemned Mbembe:

You can find [in his writings] all the features of Israel-focused antisemitism: Israel is demonized, a double standard is established, and the legitimacy of the country as a whole is called into question. In 2015, Mr. Mbembe wrote a foreword for the book *Apartheid Israel* in which he argued that Israel is worse than the apartheid regime of South Africa. Revenues from the book went to a BDS group.

Klein also noted the relationship between post-colonial studies and antisemitism: “Some of these theories very clearly stand in opposition to our culture of remembrance.” In the interview, Klein didn’t even mention that since he made his original remarks, more examples of Mbembe’s incitement against Israel have come to light.

The Mbembe affair has not ended. The debate continues in the German media. In the meantime, it has emerged that Mbembe has received two prestigious German awards. In 2015, he received the Geschwister Scholl prize. This award of €10,000 was particularly misplaced, as Hans and Sophie Scholl were symbols of the German resistance to the Nazi regime. In 2018, Mbembe received the Gerda Henkel prize of €100,000.

Mbembe's defenders have created one of the most aggressive antisemitism whitewashes of recent years. It would be a mistake if the SWC in its annual list of top 10 antisemitic incidents of the year singled out the German official Görden. Instead, the combined defenders of Mbembe should be included.

*Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center, a former chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and author of The War of a Million Cuts. Among the honors he has received was the 2019 International Lion of Judah Award of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research paying tribute to him as the leading international authority on contemporary antisemitism.*