

Germany's reaction to Hamas's attack on Israel

Lidia Gibadło , Kamil Frymark

On 17 October 2023, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Yitzhak Herzog in Tel Aviv. In a statement to the press, he once again condemned the attack by Hamas, emphasised Germany's solidarity with Israel, reaffirmed the Israeli state's right to self-defence and stressed that Germany views Israel's security as its *raison d'état*. Scholz also warned external actors against interfering in the ongoing conflict.

The Chancellor's visit is one element of the quick and decisive response by the German political class as a whole to Hamas's attack on 7 October. In a special resolution adopted unanimously by all parliamentary groups, a rare occurrence, the German MPs expressed their backing for various initiatives including offering Israel all the support which it needs to defend itself, and condemned the attacks perpetrated by Hamas and Hezbollah. The German ministry of defence has allowed the Israeli army to use to send two Heron TP UAVs which Germany is leasing from Israel. German defence minister Boris Pistorius is another politician to have recently visited Tel Aviv (on 19 October).

Several German cities saw demonstrations of solidarity with Israel. The largest such demonstration was held on 8 October in Berlin, and numbered around 2000 participants. At the same time, pro-Palestinian demonstrations with several hundred attendees have been held over the last week, with many of them transforming into riots. The biggest such rallies so far have been held in Berlin (between several hundred and 1000 protestors), Düsseldorf (around 700) and Frankfurt am Main (around 300, despite a local ban).

The German government is maintaining contact with its Arab partners in the Middle East. The situation in the region was discussed during Chancellor Scholz's meetings with the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani (on 12 October) and King Abdullah II of Jordan (on 17 October) in Berlin, and Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (on 18 October) in Cairo. The Chancellor's trip was preceded by a visit paid by foreign minister Annalena Baerbock (Greens) to Israel (on 13 October), from which she travelled to Egypt. A week later she returned to the Middle East, this time to visit Jordan, Israel and Lebanon. One important subject of her talks with the Arab leaders involved the humanitarian aid for Palestinian civilians which Germany intends to deliver to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Germany provided more than \$202m in support in 2022, and was the second biggest donor (after the US) to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). During her visit to Jordan, Baerbock pledged to offer another €50m to fund humanitarian aid for the Palestinian civilian population. In 2023, Germany decided to allocate €125m for bilateral projects to be carried out in 2023–4. Germany's financial

involvement in offering development assistance to Palestine has so far amounted to a total of €250m. However, in response to the attack by Hamas, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has decided to halt these payments, and will review those of the supported programmes which are being implemented on Palestinian territories.

Commentary

- The strong reaction from the entire German political class to the Hamas attack results from Israel's special status in Berlin's foreign policy, which is determined by Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust. Angela Merkel, who referred to Israel's security as "Germany's *raison d'état*" during her speech to the Knesset in 2008, has come to symbolise this approach. Despite their special status, German-Israeli relations have not been devoid of certain contentious issues, for example regarding criticism of the expansion of settlements in the West Bank, instances of violation of the Palestinian population's rights, and judicial reforms which envisage a reduction in the competences of the Supreme Court in Jerusalem (see '[The political crisis in Israel: the end of the beginning](#)').
- The German government's involvement in stabilising the situation in Israel serves several purposes. Firstly, Berlin intends to prevent the fighting between Israel and Hamas from spilling over into the Middle East as a whole. The escalation of another conflict in the EU's neighbourhood, after the war in Ukraine, may pose a threat to its security and force Western states to increase their political and financial involvement in the region. In addition, an escalation in fighting may trigger another wave of migration which, given the ongoing migration pressure, could exacerbate tensions within the EU over this issue. This is why Chancellor Scholz has called on Iran and Hezbollah not to interfere in the ongoing conflict, and has become involved in mediation with Arab and Western partners (including regarding issues such as providing assistance to German citizens on Palestinian territory and releasing those who have been abducted by Hamas). Secondly, Berlin's involvement has an image-related aspect. Germany intends to present itself as a global actor which is as concerned as the US, France and the UK are about restoring stability in the Middle East. Aside from supporting Israel, representatives of the German government have pledged to provide assistance to Palestinian civilians; this is intended to boost the humanitarian profile of Germany's foreign policy.
- Germany's unwavering support for Israel and its uncompromising stance expressed in the public debate (Scholz gave two speeches to the Bundestag on the subject within just a few days) is also of major domestic significance. Most importantly it is an expression of solidarity with the Jewish community in Germany, which numbers around 250,000 individuals, including around 100,000 members of 108 Jewish communities. In addition, from the Chancellor's point of view, the diplomatic offensive is an opportunity to boost the government's approval rating and to divert attention from selected domestic problems (such as the economic decline and migration issues). The majority of Germans (79% of the individuals surveyed by the Infratest dimap polling company on 28 September) have a negative opinion of the ruling coalition's work. Following a series of defeats suffered by the parties making up the ruling coalition in the elections to the *Landtags* of Bavaria and Hesse, the level of support for the SPD and the Greens is running at 14%, and for the FDP just 4%. Alongside this, according to a survey carried out by the

Forsa polling centre, 66% of the respondents view Germany's clear stance in support of Israel as correct (this proportion includes 87% of the supporters of the SPD, 84% of the Greens, 68% of the FDP, 73% of the CDU/CSU, and 49% of the AfD).

- The attack on Israel is the latest in a series of foreign conflicts affecting Germany which threatens to destabilise its domestic situation. Debates on the problem of anti-Semitic demonstrations have been held in the Bundestag, and the government in Berlin and the individual federal states have decided to step up the protection of Jewish places of worship and institutions. Germany's interior minister Nancy Faeser (SPD) has announced a series of measures targeting Hamas activity in Germany, which will include preventing fundraising for terrorist activity. Hamas has no organised structures in Germany (German counterintelligence estimates the number of active Hamas supporters in the country at 450). Since 2001, the organisation has been labelled as a terrorist organisation across the EU and has been banned in Germany. Moreover, in 2021 a ban was introduced on using its symbols and flags. Chancellor Scholz has also announced the intention to ban the Samidoun, an association which operates in Germany in support of solidarity with Palestinian prisoners. Like Hamas, it has no permanent structures in Germany. The group, which is a support network for imprisoned Palestinians, has emerged from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Immediately after the Hamas attack on Israel, supporters of Samidoun organised celebrations in Berlin's Neukölln district.
- The increasingly frequent anti-Jewish attacks which have been organised in Germany following the events of 7 October are undermining the government's efforts to fight anti-Semitism (see '[The shades of German anti-Semitism](#)'). Despite the ban on pro-Palestinian demonstrations which has been introduced in numerous cities, protests are continuing. According to a spokesperson for the Berlin police, more than 370 crimes related to this conflict have so far been registered in the capital alone, including instances of Molotov cocktails being thrown at a synagogue and the Star of David being painted on the walls of Jewish people's houses (at least 22 such cases). Several German cities have seen the tearing down or destruction of Israeli flags displayed in front of public buildings as a sign of solidarity. The situation is particularly tense in some schools (especially in Berlin and several cities in North Rhine-Westphalia), where anti-Semitic incidents and even acts of violence motivated by anti-Semitism have been reported. The Senate of Berlin has established a special task force to assist the local educational institutions in containing the crisis.
- The anti-Israeli demonstrations held in German cities have mostly been attended by individuals of Arab origin, and have once again intensified the debate regarding the difficulties in integrating some of the migrants into German society. The situation is most difficult in Berlin's Neukölln district which has around 350,000 inhabitants, with at least half of them having a migrant background. In many schools the proportion of migrant children is as high as 90%. Neukölln is also one of the most densely populated neighbourhoods in Germany as a whole. Recently it has witnessed numerous instances of escalation of violence targeting law enforcement officers (see '[Germany: the consequences of the New Year's Eve riots](#)'). The riots have boosted demands to curb immigration to Germany, including the proposal voiced by the Christian Democrats that only individuals who declare their support for Israel's right to exist as a state may be

granted German citizenship. According to a survey conducted by the *Bild* daily newspaper, 71% of the respondents support the view that immigration from Muslim countries poses a major threat to Germany's security (9% of the individuals surveyed support the opposite view).