

# An Incident of Bias

## Antisemitism-Monitoring in Germany under Scrutiny

A Report on the Department for Research and Information on Antisemitism (RIAS)

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**|Diaspora))))//Alliance\** is an international organization dedicated to fighting antisemitism and its instrumentalization by promoting the values of a plural democracy.

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and Information on Antisemitism (RIAS)

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## Publisher's Note

Over the past few years, there has been an intensifying international dispute over the definition of antisemitism, particularly in the context of Israel-Palestine. The following report, researched and written by Israeli journalist Itay Mashlach, investigates tensions in Germany over the definition of antisemitism by closely examining the operating principles and public outreach of the country's leading antisemitism watchdog, the Department for Research and Information on Antisemitism (RIAS).

The report's findings are deeply concerning: RIAS's statistics and reporting exhibit a political bias that both favors the perspective of the Israeli right and is reinforced by opaque methodologies and a crude conception of antisemitism as an eternal and unyielding animus. Given that RIAS is a highly regarded authority in its field, the organization's flawed approach and the alarmist media reporting resulting from its output have significant implications, including the stigmatization of migrant communities, the chilling of political speech, and the repression of human rights activism — including the speech and activism of Jews and Israelis.

Work on this report, which involved substantial investigative research, was finalized in September of 2023, and the report was due to be published shortly after. In the wake of the massacre of civilians in Israel perpetrated by Hamas on Oct. 7, and the Israeli army's subsequent devastation of the Gaza Strip — involving one of the most lethal and intensive bombing campaigns in recent history and a total siege of the enclave — there has been a noticeable increase in hostile acts directed against Jewish individuals and communities. Concurrently, there has been a surge in violence — sometimes deadly — and its incitement directed against Muslim and Arab communities around Europe and North America, alongside heightened government repression of Palestine solidarity activism.

Publication of this report was postponed in the face of these devastating developments, which personally impacted everyone involved in its production. The report's findings, however, remain as urgent as ever. The fight against antisemitism necessitates a clarity of terms, transparency, equanimity, and a commitment to distinguishing between serious disagreement and actual harm.

Amidst the shrinking of democratic spaces and a triumphant authoritarian right poised to instrumentalize divisions between them, Jewish and Muslim communities across Germany endure heightened tensions and reverberating violence. It is incumbent upon those committed to the wellbeing and safety of all to lead an open and honest debate on the ways in which hatred and harm is reported and documented. We hope this report will help facilitate such a debate.

***Diaspora Alliance, May 2024***

## Executive Summary

The Department for Research and Information on Antisemitism, recognized by its German abbreviation RIAS (*Recherche- und Informationsstelle Antisemitismus*), is Germany's foremost antisemitism watchdog. Started as a small project in Berlin in 2015, this predominantly state-funded organization has grown into a nationwide network, with offices established in 11 federal states. Its range of activities includes gathering statistics, publishing reports, advising policymakers and civil society, and regularly commenting on the scope of antisemitism in Germany in national and international media. Throughout its ascent, RIAS has remained largely exempt from rigorous public scrutiny.

The following comprehensive report, written by German-Israeli journalist Itay Mashiach, is the first critical assessment of RIAS's work, and it closely examines the organization's operational principles and public outreach. The findings are deeply disconcerting: RIAS's approach to the crucial mission of tracking antisemitism in Germany lacks transparency, thus undermining the organization's capacity to provide clear and accountable data. Its methodology consistently obscures the overall context of registered incidents, identifying them as antisemitic *tout court* at the expense of other likely explanations, and it misuses already-controversial definitions of antisemitism that focus on speech related to the state of Israel.

This methodology has led RIAS to some startling conclusions. The organization has, for example, categorized the anti-occupation demonstrations of retired peace activists, a theater production on Jewish-Arab relations, and even a speech about the lessons of the Holocaust (given by one of Israel's most prominent historians) as antisemitic incidents.

By the same token, much of RIAS's work focuses on delegitimizing pro-Palestinian advocacy and vilifying markers of Palestinian identity. This report convincingly demonstrates that virtually any Palestinian public event in Germany is eligible for inclusion in RIAS's statistics. At the same time, RIAS uses its publications to propagate one-sided historical and political narratives that legitimize Israel's military occupation and the actions of its right-wing government.

Additionally, this report highlights how RIAS's emphasis on "Israel-related antisemitism" leads to an *underestimation* of the threat emanating from Germany's extreme right. In the state of Thuringia, for example, a focal point of Germany's neo-Nazi scene, RIAS attributed only 37 percent of antisemitic

incidents reported in 2021 to a “populist/extreme right background,” whereas the police linked 98 percent of recorded antisemitic offenses in the same year to the right. This tendency to understate right-wing antisemitism extends to RIAS’s online activity, whereby the volume of the organization’s tweets about “Israel-related antisemitism” disproportionately exceeds its own statistics on such a political motivation for antisemitic incidents.

As the report argues, this political bias — coupled with an underlying “eternalist” conception of antisemitism as a singular, continuous phenomenon across time and space — impedes our comprehension of anti-Jewish hostility and violence and, by extension, hinders efforts to prevent it.

This report is the culmination of a comprehensive investigation by the German-Israeli journalist Itay Mashiach, who drew on hundreds of public documents and documents acquired through freedom of information requests, carried out comprehensive data analysis, and conducted interviews with dozens of experts in the field. RIAS has declined to speak with the author of the report despite several inquiries.

The research and writing of this report were supported by Diaspora Alliance, an international organization dedicated to fighting antisemitism by promoting the values of a plural democracy. Diaspora Alliance sees this report as part of a wider effort to ensure that the vital struggle against antisemitism is safeguarded from political instrumentalization.



## Introduction

The special guest at the Saxony-Anhalt Parliament's official 2020 Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony was Moshe Zimmermann, a distinguished Israeli historian and professor emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Born in Jerusalem in 1943 to German Jews who managed to emigrate shortly before World War II, the professor had a personal connection to the topic of his commemorative speech and the ceremony itself. But on this occasion, Zimmermann explained, he wished to share some thoughts stemming from an entire scholarly career dedicated to German-Jewish history and the history of antisemitism.

Zimmermann's lecture to German parliamentarians that day examined the 200 years of what he termed "the twisted road to Auschwitz."<sup>1</sup> It aimed to show that it is the early moments of looming atrocities — those moments that are hard to discern in real time because developments are too slow and their accumulation too gradual — that should really alarm us. "Never again Auschwitz?" This is too obvious," Zimmermann said. It is rather, he continued, the modest beginnings that could eventually lead to Auschwitz that deserve the warning "never again." He further emphasized that his speech, being about "ubiquitous human behavior and universal history," applied to the entire world, including Israelis — and, in their case, "not only from a victim perspective."

Little could Zimmermann have foreseen that his comments would make their way into an influential survey of antisemitic incidents in Germany, published at the end of that year. The [report](#) — compiled by the Federal Association of Departments for Research and Information on Antisemitism (RIAS), a high-profile antisemitism watchdog established a few years earlier — included Zimmermann's remarks as part of a list of incidents surrounding the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. It omitted to mention any details about the professor, merely attributing his comments to "a speaker" and citing them alongside vandalized memorials, Nazi salutes, and the "dissemination of extreme right-wing and antisemitic propaganda." RIAS deemed that the professor's comments had strayed into antisemitism because they "suggested a comparison between the Israeli policies toward the Palestinians and the antisemitic policies of National-Socialism."<sup>2</sup>

The decontextualization of Zimmermann's brief aside at the end of his speech, to the extent that it could be classified as antisemitic, was no accident.

<sup>1</sup> An authorized version of the speech can be found [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Bundesverband RIAS e.V., "[Annual Report: Antisemitic Incidents in Germany 2020](#)," p. 41.

Rather, it resulted from a highly specific understanding of what antisemitism is — one that relies heavily on a contested definition that centers criticism of Israel; consistently blurs the line between legitimate political speech and anti-Jewish bigotry; and, while doing so, takes an “eternalist” view of antisemitism as a singular phenomenon that remains consistent across time, space, and social contexts. It is this “Israel-related” understanding of antisemitism, and the impact it has had on the German public sphere via RIAS’s work, that is the focus of this report.

In particular, this report examines how an organization with an impeccable reputation, whose statistics have acquired a semi-official status in Germany, defines, understands, and classifies antisemitism — organizational processes that have yet to come under public scrutiny. It also investigates the impact RIAS’s methodology has on the perception of antisemitism in Germany.

## Background

Antisemitism is a significant problem in Germany, which is home to some 120 – 150,000 Jews, most of whom migrated from the Soviet Union and arrived between the mid-1990s and mid 2000s.<sup>3</sup> Crime statistics, surveys among the Jewish and non-Jewish population, and occasional violent incidents all attest to the gravity of anti-Jewish prejudice, which rightly attracts the attention of policymakers, civil society, and the media.

Against this backdrop, RIAS’s establishment in 2015 had the potential to make a real impact. Other organizations had long been monitoring antisemitic episodes in Germany as part of an anti-racist or anti-extremist agenda, but no institution had focused exclusively on this issue.<sup>4</sup> RIAS’s mission to compile accurate and consistent statistics of incidents, both above and below the criminal threshold, promised a long-term revolution in awareness of and sensitivity to antisemitism. More specifically, the fight against antisemitism, in which the German government is deeply invested, needed to be surveyed and monitored more systematically, in a manner that was driven by data and insights from a dedicated organization engaged with the affected communities.

RIAS has fulfilled many of these promises. However, it has done so without ever facing a critical analysis of its principles and methods. Even some of RIAS’s closest partners, who work with the organization and use its statistics regularly, do not know how exactly it compiles its data, as one of them acknowledged in an interview for this report. Restricting access to its complete and detailed database, even in an anonymized form, not only allows RIAS to avoid scrutiny on how it assesses each case, but it also lets the organization select its focus and messaging in an untransparent manner. Moreover, despite a general consensus around the dangers of antisemitism, the question of what it is and how to quantify it, has never been more controversial, above all when it concerns the “Israel-related” antisemitism on which this report focuses.

Over the past two decades, the Israeli government and its supporters have stepped up their politicization of this label to the detriment of free speech and political expression. Central to this politicization was the issuing of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism

<sup>3</sup> According to the research of the Israeli demographer Segio Della Pergola, the core Jewish population in Germany in 2020 amounted to 118,000, while around 150,000 have at least one Jewish parent.

<sup>4</sup> Organizations such as the Amadeu-Antonio-Foundation, ReachOut and the Berliner Register have all put together some form of chronicle detailing right-wing, racist, and antisemitic incidents since the early 2000s.

(hereafter: IHRA definition), which focuses heavily on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>5</sup> RIAS makes use of its own expanded version of the IHRA definition in its classification of antisemitism. Once the IHRA adopted the definition in 2016, following a campaign by Jewish advocacy organizations such as the American Jewish Committee and the Simon Wiesenthal Center,<sup>6</sup> the Israeli government and others intensively coordinated and pushed for its widespread adoption and codification. RIAS uses and interprets this definition contrary to its authors' original intentions and in line with the Israeli government and its supporters.

## Aims

In an open society, the stances adopted by an organization like RIAS should be debated, questioned, examined and re-examined. In the current state of affairs, claims to scientific rigor — as made by RIAS — conceal more than they reveal. The goal of this report is therefore to examine RIAS's positions, methods, practices, and policies in light of the controversies surrounding the IHRA definition. While the organization's overarching goal — fighting antisemitism — is beyond dispute, a discussion of the means should not be taboo. What's more, RIAS's semi-official status in the eyes of the state and the press heightens the need to research and reveal its methods and positions.

To that end, this report's main argument is that RIAS is biased in favor of a perspective on Israel-Palestine that is aligned with Israel's right-wing government. RIAS's work actively contributes to the silencing of pro-human rights activism, primarily that of Palestinians and also of left-wing Israelis and diaspora Jews, by conflating criticism of Israel and anti-Zionism with antisemitism. Moreover, the organization focuses intensively on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, in some cases, seems to over-represent its actual role in antisemitic incidents around Germany. More troublingly, this bias is baked into RIAS's monitoring and classification methods, which lack transparency. This bias should be acknowledged given that RIAS is held in such high regard, and given that it wields such authority in the field of antisemitism prevention — thereby meaningfully influencing local, state, national, and EU policy.

This report calls for RIAS to exercise greater transparency regarding its positions, activities, and methodologies. It further calls for a more critical examination of RIAS's work by its political sponsors, civil society, and the press. The report also urges RIAS, as a state-funded organization of considerable stature, to start cooperating with critical scholars and journalists and to support open debate. It also emphasizes the needs for diversification in the field of antisemitism monitoring, an open discussion on the principles and methods of the same, and the inclusion of voices from outside of RIAS's orbit. Finally, this report calls for a careful reflection, both within RIAS and in the field more generally, on the ways in which monitoring practices may be instrumentalized for discriminatory politics and harm marginalized communities.

## Methodology

This report draws on dozens of documents published by RIAS, as well as interviews with scholars, policymakers, activists, individuals currently or formerly

<sup>5</sup> RIAS uses its own version of the IHRA definition, "operationalized and adjusted in a few places for the German context." The changes include a complete rewrite of the core definition, as well as the addition of several examples of antisemitism that are not in the original version, such as "The depiction of Jewish religious practice as an expression of an archaic culture," and the claim that Israel is a "colonial" endeavor. RIAS also removed from the German version of the definition the crucial caveat: "criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic."

<sup>6</sup> Jamie Stern-Weiner, a doctoral student at the University of Oxford, has shown this in great detail in his analysis, *The Politics of a Definition*.

involved with RIAS and its various branches, and others who work with partner organizations in the field. Because RIAS's database of antisemitic incidents is not available for independent research, even in anonymized form, an approximation thereof was assembled by systematically scraping RIAS's website, where it published a partial timeline of incidents. Under specific categories and within set timeframes, this reconstructed database offers a relatively extensive view of the original.<sup>7</sup> Further case descriptions were gathered by systematically analyzing the Twitter and Facebook feeds of the organization. Unfortunately, RIAS declined to be interviewed for this report and did not respond to any further inquiries.

## Chapter Overview

Over the last few years, RIAS has grown from a one-man show to a nationwide network of highly-regarded and generously-funded monitoring organizations. The **first chapter**, "An organization on the rise," describes the organization's ascent, including its growing prestige and authority. More information on the organization's funding can be found in **Appendix I** at the end of the report.

The **second chapter**, "Flawed approaches," focuses on two key principles in RIAS's work which undergird its bias and flawed interpretation of antisemitic incidents. The first is its disinterest in the context of the incidents it records, which allows the organization to reflexively delegitimize statements it records during a given incident based on keywords alone — regardless of who made them and why.

The second principle is RIAS's reliance on an "eternalist" understanding of antisemitism. This understanding aligns with the classic Zionist interpretation of anti-Jewish prejudice that, at its logical conclusion, casts doubt on the overall feasibility of Jewish life in the diaspora. It forms the theoretical basis underlying RIAS's decontextualization of incidents it categorizes as antisemitic, a charge that is based in a view of anti-Jewish bigotry as an eternal, immutable force with no local or contextual dimensions. This chapter shows that this framework, when put into practice, leads to a constant escalation in RIAS's reporting of antisemitism; equally, it further hampers our understanding of anti-Jewish bigotry and, by extension, efforts to prevent it.

The **third chapter**, "Data without details," analyzes how RIAS's bias manifests in the organization's documents and communications. It shows how RIAS overemphasizes Israel-related antisemitism even where it is negligible. It further examines how RIAS's reports, which are long, complex, and overladen with statistics, avoid the simplest details on cases of antisemitism while overplaying "online" incidents.

The **fourth chapter**, "Biased practices," examines RIAS's bias in favor of the Israeli state narrative in practice. It examines the case of a small vigil held regularly in Munich against the Israeli occupation, which RIAS labeled antisemitic and which became a significant factor in its regional antisemitism statistics. This chapter explores how RIAS's interpretation of events is prone to bias; and it examines how that bias becomes entrenched when the facts of the matter are routinely obscured.

The last two chapters explore the consequences that incur when an organization of RIAS's stature employs biased political positions, decontextualization, and

<sup>7</sup> RIAS's partial timeline of incidents, or "the chronicle," appears on its website in a format that renders an independent analysis impossible. Although the chronicle specifies the time, place, description, and classification of every incident, it does not support downloading, sorting, or searching the data. (In fact, the chosen user interface makes it extremely difficult to even copy the data.) To solve this, we ran a bot that browsed through the chronicle and reproduced it in a table format. The bot ran on May 20, 2022, and found 1,981 incidents, mainly in the timeframe between January 2019 and December 2021. This was a fundamental source for this research. RIAS has not updated the chronicle since.

other opaque practices. **Chapter five**, “Delegitimized narratives,” presents one of these outcomes: the stigmatization of pro-Palestinian positions and even of Palestinian identity itself. The chapter demonstrates how, given the incidents labeled “antisemitic” in RIAS’s reports and case descriptions, it is hard to imagine any political activity by Palestinians related to Israel-Palestine that would *not* be classified as such. It further discusses a secret, “incriminating” dossier on a German-Palestinian academic, which was compiled by RIAS and circulated privately in order to delegitimize her and damage her career.

The **last chapter** discusses another outcome, the flipside of delegitimizing the pro-Palestinian stance: the reinforcement of a right-wing, pro-settler narrative of the conflict in the Middle East, which is often of little relevance to various instances of antisemitism in Germany. It shows how RIAS takes an active role in promoting this narrative, “educating” the public on questions ranging from diplomacy and international law to escalations in Gaza. The chapter further shows how RIAS intervenes in internal Israeli debates; brands left-wing Israeli protesters as antisemites; and cooperates with an Israeli government ministry responsible for disseminating propaganda.

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Finally, a personal note. The author of this report does not wish to ignore his own biases while pointing out others’. These words were written in Tel Aviv, where the State of Israel is facing serious and immediate danger. A right-wing, pro-settler government is directly threatening its democratic institutions and, for the first time, is making an autocratic and even fascist regime a realistic prospect. Five-and-a-half decades of unresolved conflict, continuous violence, and human rights violations in the occupied territories have left their mark on Israeli society. It is more nationalist, chauvinistic, and racist than ever before, and the threat of an authoritarian takeover is real. Zimmermann’s warning quoted at the beginning of this introduction proves more pertinent by the day.

Many Israelis believe that the international community taking an uncompromising stance on their government’s abuses is one of the last remaining avenues to avert a total disaster. Promoting the Israeli government’s right-wing perspective abroad, protecting its policies, silencing its challengers, and normalizing human rights violations jeopardize this avenue. This report’s attempt to challenge such biases is rooted in a deep concern for the future of the Jewish state.

***Itay Mashiach, August 2023***

# 1      **An organization on the rise**

RIAS has grown rapidly in a very short span of time. Started as a one-man project nine years ago, it is now a federal association that oversees a large network of local research centers throughout Germany. It enjoys an impeccable reputation, generous funding, and significant authority. This chapter describes RIAS's trajectory since its establishment, and it explores the organization's sphere of influence. It argues that RIAS has acquired semi-official status in the field of antisemitism monitoring and unquestioned authority in public debates on the topic.

## **Origins**

Civil society organizations in Germany have been aggregating data on hate incidents for over three decades. [LGBTQ organizations](#) began systematically collecting, verifying, and documenting victim testimonies in the 1990s. Anti-racist initiatives, which arose after the wave of neo-Nazi violence that washed over Germany following reunification, have done the same. The impetus for many of these independent monitoring initiatives was the underreporting by marginalized communities of hate incidents directed against them. This underreporting resulted from real or perceived institutional racism, homophobia, or political bias.

Before RIAS arrived, antisemitism was monitored by organizations documenting racist and extreme right-wing violence in general. RIAS was the first project to focus exclusively on antisemitism, and its founding can be traced back to a [2014 survey](#) on perceptions and experiences of antisemitism in Berlin, conducted with the [support](#) of the Society for a Democratic Culture (VDK) and the Amadeu Antonio Foundation. Introducing [its results](#), Benjamin Steinitz, RIAS's future founder, explained what prompted it:

In the summer of 2014, Israeli forces took military action in the Gaza Strip, which is controlled by the terrorist organization Hamas ("Operation Protective Edge"), in an effort to effectively stop Palestinian rocket fire on Israeli civilians. As a result, dozens of public protests with anti-Israel sentiment took place in Berlin, where openly anti-Jewish forms of expression were repeatedly identified.



The survey included 11 in-depth interviews with employees of Jewish institutions, who shared their everyday experiences of antisemitism and the strategies Jews in the city adopt to avoid or confront them. Many of RIAS's principles can be traced back to the conclusions section of that survey, and the organization would continue to conduct similar studies in preparation for new RIAS chapters across Germany.

In January 2015, RIAS officially launched as a VDK project under the direction of Steinitz.<sup>8</sup> Its main goal was to record antisemitic incidents and facilitate support services for those affected by them (the organization understands "incidents" as manifestations of antisemitism both above and below the criminal threshold). As the German government soon acknowledged, recording these incidents in a consistent manner complements antisemitism data collected by the police and the judiciary, and helps one to "obtain a picture of the situation of antisemitism ... that is as close to reality as possible, in order to enable even more targeted prevention work on its basis."<sup>9</sup>

Beyond documentation, the organization contributes to the public representation of victims' perspectives. Through its media appearances and social media activities, RIAS makes Jewish experiences more visible, and, most importantly, it gives victims and witnesses — some of whom, for various reasons, refrain from filing a complaint with the police — the opportunity to testify about their experiences. In this regard, RIAS functions as an "intermediary to the police."<sup>10</sup>

Several essential principles guide this work. First and foremost, the organization claims to use strict definitions and classification systems to ensure the consistency and uniformity of its statistics. One source for such data is an in-house online reporting portal. RIAS purportedly verifies the data it receives via this portal, but there is very little information on its verification methods or protocols.<sup>11</sup> Another key principle is the victims' privacy: to honor their trust, RIAS's policy is for "the persons concerned [to] decide how the incident they reported is to be handled."

RIAS monitors the media, sends observers to protests and public events "with [an] antisemitic and anti-Israel orientation," and conducts "systematic" surveys of Jewish organizations.<sup>12</sup> Finally, RIAS also compares data with other monitoring NGOs. Until 2022, RIAS complemented its statistics by receiving data from the Berlin police, a practice that the police discontinued due to data privacy concerns.

Observers have been quick to acknowledge that RIAS has helped foster a greater awareness of antisemitism in Berlin. It has been described as "an awesome door opener" for Jews who feel that the organization is part of their community, or at least understands their concerns.<sup>13</sup> RIAS's systematic and detailed evaluation of data has been praised as unique in the German NGO landscape.<sup>14</sup>

Most crucially, in a 2017 report, a government-appointed independent expert group tasked with supporting the campaign against antisemitism applauded RIAS for documenting the breadth of antisemitic phenomena in German society, as well as for the reliability of its data. One of the report's recommendations was to develop government-funded research centers in RIAS's image in other German states, under a shared national platform.

8 It was formerly hosted under a different organization, ReachOut, which advises victims of racism, antisemitism, and right-wing extremism and offers educational programs in these fields. See website of the Mobile Counseling against Right-wing Extremism.

9 Parliamentary Question from Konstantin von Notz, May 25, 2020. See also Abschlussbericht des Kabinettsausschusses zur Bekämpfung von Rechtsextremismus und Rassismus, May 14, 2021, p. 45.

10 Bericht der Bundesregierung über den Umsetzungsstand und die Bewertung der Handlungsempfehlungen des Unabhängigen Expertenkreises Antisemitismus 11.9.2020, p. 8

11 There is no information provided except for the timeframe in which the organization should contact the victim. See Bundesverband RIAS See also Max Laube, "Antisemitische Vorfälle in Berlin (Januar 2017 – Juni 2019): Art, Ausmaß, Entwicklung," ZfA: 2021, pp. 28–29. Laube includes an excellent introduction to the different methods employed by the police, RIAS, and the public prosecutor for documenting antisemitism in Berlin; furthermore, he describes the different problems with each.

12 See: "Antisemitische Vorfälle 2018," p. 8–9.

13 See the comments of Kati Becker, who coordinates Berliner Register, an organization which records discriminatory incidents in the city. Minutes of the Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs and Anti-Discrimination of the Berlin House of Representatives. May 21, 2018, p. 16.

14 Laube, p. 12.

Another of the expert group's key recommendations was to appoint a federal commissioner for antisemitism to coordinate prevention efforts. Its implementation in May 2018 was a watershed moment in RIAS's history: one of the first measures taken by the newly-appointed commissioner, Dr. Felix Klein, was the funding of the Federal Association of Departments for Research and Information on Antisemitism (Federal Association RIAS), an umbrella organization for local state-based RIAS chapters, of which he also became the official honorary patron.

## Expansion

The Federal Association RIAS began its work in November 2018 with the goal of creating local chapters modeled on the original chapter, RIAS Berlin, in all German states. This was done in order to ensure the uniform documentation of antisemitic incidents as per the expert group's recommendation. Since 2019, such chapters were established in 11 other German states, most bore their parent organization's name.<sup>15</sup>

In May 2019, RIAS created a federal working group to facilitate standardized documentation methods and cooperation between its chapters. The organization thus expanded into a network of independent research and documentation centers, each funded by its respective federal state and hosted by a local institution.<sup>16</sup> A key advantage of the network is the access it provides various chapters to a centralized database; not all local chapters, however, can use it.<sup>17</sup>

Controlling access to the database is only one way the Federal Association RIAS exercises leverage over its chapters. Following the experts group's recommendation, local research centers must follow centralized guidelines. These guidelines may determine, for example, which definition of antisemitism they should use — namely, the IHRA definition.<sup>18</sup> The umbrella organization can also refuse to accept a local research center in its working group, thereby barring a particular state from the federal processes of standardized documentation and from appearing in federal publications.<sup>19</sup>

The impressive growth of RIAS's network has been matched by an increase in funding from the federal and state governments. The budget of the Federal Association RIAS alone almost tripled between 2019 and 2022, from at least 239,000 euros to at least 644,000 euros.<sup>20</sup> Factoring in RIAS Berlin and RIAS Bavaria, the projects managed directly by the Federal Association's board, funds reached an annual average of 919,000 euros in 2020–22.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, RIAS enjoys funding from private foundations, the Central Council of Jews in Germany, and individual donations. For more details, see appendix.

15 Local chapters of RIAS were opened in Bavaria, Brandenburg, Thuringia, Lower Saxony, Saarland, Saxony-Anhalt, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony, and Hesse. In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Schleswig-Holstein the local organizations are named "DIA.MV" and "LIDA-SH," respectively.

16 The hosting institutions included consulting centers for victims of hate crimes, the Antonio Amadeu Foundation, and other educational centers.

17 In an email to the author, dated June 22, 2022, a speaker for LIDA-SH, the Schleswig-Holstein research center, which is part of the Federal Association's Working Group, explained that the center does not have access to incidents of other states. DIA.MV, the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern project, on the other hand, has access to the database in an anonymized form (without personal data), allowing DIA.MV to explore, for example, how often a certain type of incident took place.

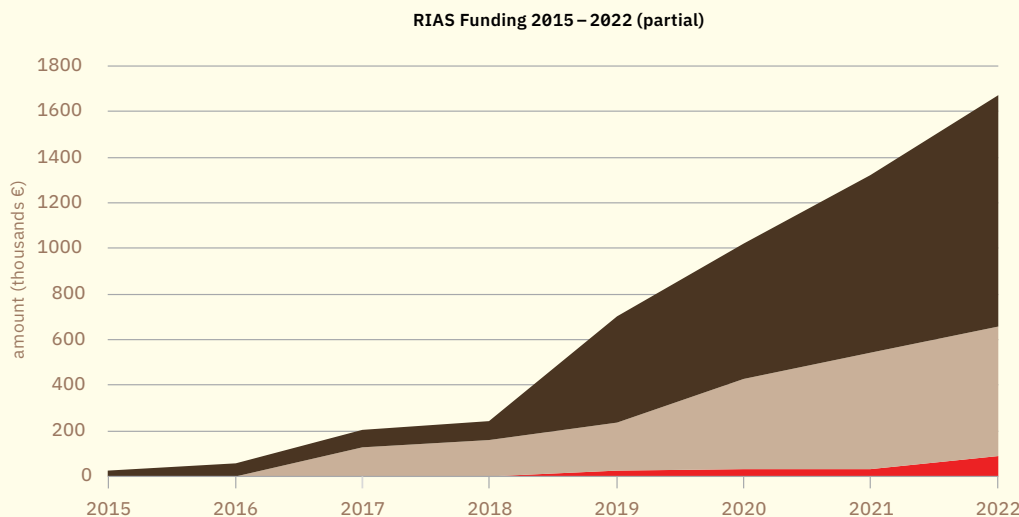
18 See, for example, the specifications published by the government of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern for the creation of a documentation center. The publication specifies RIAS Berlin as a model and the IHRA Working Definition as a basis for its work. See also the tender for Lower Saxony, which also adds compulsory training sessions by RIAS.

19 In 2021, RIAS worked behind the scenes to prevent the migrant-led Kreuzberg Initiative Against Antisemitism (KIGA), which won the tender for leading antisemitism monitoring in the state of Brandenburg, from assuming its role, threatening to limit KIGA's access to the national database. This information was revealed through a FOIA request to the Brandenburg state chancellery on May 18, 2022.

20 A small portion of the sum in 2022 is project-specific. See Appendix I for more information.

21 A major sponsor and partner of RIAS, the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, which funds both the Federal Association and several state chapters, refused to share any information on RIAS's funding. Information on income from donations is similarly unavailable. RIAS ignored all requests for comment on the issue.





✓ This chart depicts only eight local RIAS organizations and the Federal Association. It doesn't include private funding from the Amadeu Antonio Foundation and private donations. It is important to note that not all of this funding is overseen by one organization but, rather, by the local organizations that manage the respective RIAS projects.

● State  
● Federal  
● Other

## Influence

As RIAS has expanded its geographical reach and increased its funding, so too has the organization's influence grown. RIAS's statistics enjoy a semi-official status among state governments: Berlin's Senate, for example, has used them as a source in response to parliamentary inquiries<sup>22</sup> and has cited them as if RIAS were a governmental organization.<sup>23</sup> The Berlin commissioner for antisemitism, who is responsible for gathering statistics from various sources, collects data from the police, the public prosecutor, and RIAS.<sup>24</sup>

22 See, for example, [Parliamentary Question from June Tomiak, April 27, 2018](#); and [Parliamentary Question from Sebastian Walter, Nov. 9, 2018](#).

23 [Parliamentary Question from Susanne Kitschun, Aug. 19, 2021](#).

24 [Berliner Landeskonzept zur Weiterentwicklung der Antisemitismus-Prävention](#), p. 6.

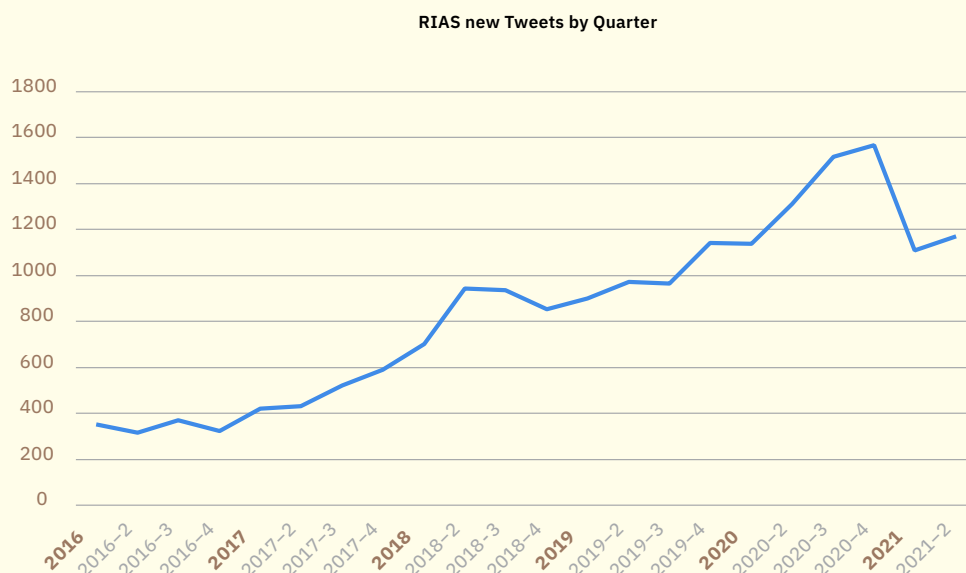
25 Email to author, May 11, 2022.

RIAS's semi-official status is also evident at the federal level. The German government "takes note" of RIAS's numbers and publications, which it sees as "a valuable supplement" to police statistics, according to a spokesperson for the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>25</sup> RIAS's statistics are similarly cited by international organizations and academic institutions.<sup>26</sup>

26 RIAS's publications are a regular source for the "Antisemitism Worldwide Report" published by the Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry at Tel Aviv University, and the "Overview of Antisemitic Incidents Recorded in the European Union" by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

The press also treats RIAS as an impartial and reliable source, [regularly reporting](#) on its findings. A 2019 independent evaluation of the organization's impact found that "RIAS is now in a position to initiate debates itself ... and has established itself as a point of contact for media inquiries on the topic [of antisemitism]."<sup>27</sup>

27 In 2018 alone it was cited in 227 media articles. See, [The final evaluation report of the state program, "Democracy. Diversity. Respect. Against right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism" from 2019](#).



← RIAS has an important presence on social media. The Twitter account of the Federal Association, with more than 30,000 followers, tweets on average more than a dozen new posts a day.

Beyond the statistics, RIAS has established itself as a central point of contact and expertise for politicians, the police, the public prosecutor, public administrators, and other civil society organizations.<sup>28</sup> Since 2016, it has cooperated closely with Berlin's police department, exchanging information and experience and often correcting police statistics by revealing incidents unknown to them. RIAS also developed a comprehensive training program for the police academy, entitled "Recognizing antisemitism, consistently prosecuting antisemitic crimes, and competently supporting victims."<sup>29</sup> The organization also works closely with Berlin's public prosecutor — from whom it receives anonymized court rulings and other information — in order to support its analyses of the court's evaluation of antisemitic motives.<sup>30</sup>

RIAS also engages in advocacy, providing information to members of parliament or administrations and lecturing at public and non-public events.<sup>31</sup> RIAS founder Steinitz has, for example, appeared before Berlin Senate committees where he has recommended, inter alia, conducting surveys "on the image of Israel and the portrayal of Judaism in [school] books" and reviewing "the curricula for integration courses for refugees regarding the presentation of Jewish life in Germany."<sup>32</sup>

According to the 2019 evaluation report, which was commissioned by the Berlin State Office for Equal Treatment and Against Discrimination (LADS), a key outcome of RIAS's advocacy was the creation of a specialist working group that brought together members of the Berlin Senate. This group put forward a 2018 [motion](#) with some far-reaching consequences, including an across-the-board adoption of the IHRA definition by the city of Berlin, the appointment of the aforementioned Berlin commissioner on antisemitism, and the exclusion of supporters of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement and others who "delegitimize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state from city-funded spaces."<sup>33</sup>

It also appears in the mandatory [lobby registry](#) of the German Bundestag as an organization that advocates for diversity, combating crime, and more.

The German "[National Strategy Against Antisemitism and for Jewish Life](#)" — the government's "first strategy to focus exclusively on fighting antisemitism and fostering Jewish life" — was published by the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community in late 2022, and it celebrated RIAS as an established partner of the German government. The federal government committed to increasing its financial support for RIAS and further called for making the organization a "trusted flagger," meaning it could initiate censoring of alleged antisemitism on social media according to its own standards.

Finally, RIAS's influence has also recently expanded beyond Germany. In 2021, the EU commissioned RIAS to write the "[Handbook for the practical use of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism](#);" in the same year, the EU published its "[Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life](#)," stating the need for "reliable and comparable data on antisemitic incidents," while citing RIAS as a model. These new developments abroad indicate that the organization could play a more prominent and active role at the EU level in the future.

28 Ibid., p. 156, 158. RIAS participates in forums at different levels, like the Berlin "[Round Table against Antisemitic Violence](#)" of the state Minister of the Interior, the "[Body of Experts for Antisemitism in the State of Berlin](#)," and the federal "[Competence Network on Antisemitism](#)."

29 The program was developed together with Mobile Counseling against Right-wing Extremism in Berlin (MBR). [Minutes of the Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs and Anti-Discrimination of the Berlin House of Representatives](#), June 5, 2019, pp. 9–11. See also [Final evaluation report](#), p. 158.

30 [Minutes](#), June 5, 2019, p. 10.

31 [Final evaluation report](#), p. 158.

32 [Minutes](#), June 5, 2019, p. 12.

33 [Final evaluation report](#), p. 158.

## 2 Flawed approaches

This chapter examines two key principles that inform RIAS's work and argues that they are inherent to the organization's bias.

The first principle is decontextualization. In general, RIAS pre-emptively dismisses the context surrounding what it deems antisemitic incidents — not by mistake but as a matter of policy. By disregarding context, RIAS can foreclose different interpretations of a text or utterance and definitively determine its meaning, without considering who made the statement and why. Deliberately overlooking context also goes against the IHRA definition and best practices in antisemitism scholarship. Furthermore, RIAS's presentation of allegedly antisemitic statements without context limits the possibility of evaluating and critiquing the organization's work.

RIAS's monitoring approach involves little more than assessing an event against a checklist of intentionally decontextualized terms and, if even a single one of those terms is observed, then the incident is automatically declared antisemitic. By way of illustration, the chapter presents two case studies involving theater shows, one in Berlin and one in Munich, in which RIAS detected antisemitism.

The second principle, which undergirds the first, is RIAS's "eternalist" understanding of antisemitism — that is, a view of antisemitism as a singular phenomenon that is constant and consistent across time, space, and social contexts. This understanding is rarely spelled out explicitly by the organization but is easily implied in its texts and analyses. As this chapter shows, the adoption of the eternalist theory — as it is dubbed by scholars — by a practice-oriented organization like RIAS has significant consequences: it over-dramatizes the nature of many antisemitic incidents; limits our understanding of antisemitism (thereby also undermining its prevention); and justifies the silencing of political narratives.

### **'Antisemitism in the theater'**

Under the headline "Antisemitism in the theater," RIAS reported a March 2020 incident involving a play in Berlin-Mitte, whose opening scene compared "[m]ass animal husbandry ... with the extermination of Jews in concentration camps," thus "relativizing the Holocaust."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> [RIAS Chronicle](#), March 1, 2020.

This is the full extent of the information RIAS provided. The anonymization of reported incidents — including the omission of non-personal data — is intended, as RIAS often emphasizes, to protect the victims and build trust with the affected

community.<sup>35</sup> But this was a public event, making it unclear who exactly needed protecting.

The purportedly offensive text was excerpted from J.M. Coetzee's 2003 novel, "Elizabeth Costello," and incorporated into the play "A Report to an Academy," by Croatian theater director Oliver Frljić. The performance took place at Maxim Gorki, one of Berlin's most acclaimed theaters. Incidentally, similar sentiments to the allegedly antisemitic remarks in the play were previously expressed by Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Polish-born, American-Jewish writer who fled the Nazi threat in the 1930s; in his story "The Letter Writer," Singer described animal husbandry as "an eternal Treblinka" and arguably inspired the fictional Elizabeth Costello.<sup>36</sup>

Such vague descriptions of allegedly antisemitic incidents relieve RIAS of the need to justify their classification criteria, under which both Coetzee and Singer qualify as sources of antisemitism. Omitting details that might raise questions or encourage debate, the description is still specific enough to instruct the reader that the comparison is antisemitic, indicating what RIAS considers to be the limits of free speech.

RIAS's "Antisemitism in the Theater" report also exemplifies another aspect of the organization's method: the routine citation of text without context. From RIAS's perspective, certain statements automatically amount to antisemitism, regardless of who uttered them to whom and to what end. This undiscerning approach makes any contextual investigation redundant: a crime scene, a demonstration, a private conversation, or a theater stage become equally likely settings for an antisemitic incident.

This approach also relies on RIAS's flawed reading of the examples listed in the IHRA definition. Specifically, [RIAS](#) recast IHRA's examples of antisemitic incidents as concrete identifiers of antisemitism, going so far as to edit the IHRA text to emphasize the centrality of the examples (which became "[essential features of antisemitic manifestations](#)") and subsequently insist that they form part of the definition.<sup>37</sup>

RIAS argues that its reference to specific examples is one of the IHRA definition's strengths. Definitions that emphasize context, they argue, "remain very vague in the central question — whether a case is antisemitic or not."<sup>38</sup> Their argument ignores that the IHRA definition actually calls for "taking into account the overall context" in every possible case. Indeed, context — especially as it relates to examples involving Israel-Palestine — has been a crucial issue in the IHRA definition since the very beginning, when the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), an EU agency, commissioned the original version of the definition in 2005. At the time, the various Jewish groups involved in drafting it, as well as EUMC officials, wrestled over the emphasis to be placed on context. Eventually, a caveat regarding context "was inserted to 'allay ... concerns' that 'critics of Israel' would be illegitimately targeted."<sup>39</sup>

Dr. Juliane Wetzels, a historian from the Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung — Technische Universität Berlin ("Center for Research on Antisemitism — Technical University Berlin"), also emphasizes the importance of context in the IHRA definition. In particular, she writes, the examples relating to Israel in the definition "make it clear that context plays a central role in evaluating whether

35 "The central principle is the protection of trust: the persons concerned and the witnesses decide how their report and their information are to be handled." [RIAS Bayern](#).

36 See Richard Alan Northover, J.M. Coetzee and Animal Rights: [Elizabeth Costello's Challenge to Philosophy](#), p. 37.

37 For further details concerning the "adjustments" of the IHRA definition by RIAS, see introduction.

38 Representatives of RIAS Federal Association have criticized the [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism \(JDA\)](#), especially over how it "does not describe the exact relationship between text and context." Tanja Kinzel and Daniel Poensgen, Bundesverband RIAS, "[Wie lässt sich Antisemitismus erkennen? Chancen und Grenzen der IHRA-Arbeitsdefinition](#)."

39 Jamie Stern-Weiner, "[The Politics of a Definition](#)," 2021, p. 17.

or not something can be understood as antisemitic.” Wetzel stresses that some statements: “do not have an antisemitic connotation in terms of freedom of expression — even if they are made in an extremely critical manner — but in other contexts ... may well serve antisemitic stereotypes. Accordingly, it mostly depends on the context.”<sup>40</sup>

Wetzel has been a member of the German delegation to the IHRA since 2000, and she was involved in the preliminary stages of the definition’s creation.<sup>41</sup> She was also a member of the Bundestag-commissioned expert group which paved the way for RIAS’s federal expansion.

In an interview, Wetzel praises much of RIAS’s work in raising awareness among the police and judiciary and giving victims the option to register an incident without going directly through law enforcement agencies. Yet she also has her reservations: “Whether or not everything [RIAS registers] can always be classified as antisemitic is certainly a question that arises here and there. Israel-related antisemitism in particular has this gray area, where you always have to take a close look at the context.”

RIAS can sometimes be “one-sided,” Wetzel acknowledges, and can overlook “who says what, in what context, what is the goal, what is the political background, and so on.” This disregard for context, she continues, can lead to “everything that is supposedly antisemitic [being] included in an inflationary way.” While Wetzel was fully on board with RIAS’s project in its early years, she has more recently “become a bit more skeptical.” The organization’s approach, she admits, “need[s] scholarly expertise ... [and] more sound scientific advice.”

As it stands, however, RIAS’s checklist approach fits the organization’s policy of focusing almost exclusively on the victim’s experience and interpretation without considering the broader context. In fact, this was one of the motivations for its use of the EUMC definition (which later became the IHRA definition) in the first place. “The controversy over recording antisemitic incidents related to Israel can only be defused,” RIAS founder Steinitz [explained](#) in 2014, “if an overarching understanding of antisemitism is achieved, which describes its different manifestations regardless of the individuals responsible for it, which is based on content-related criteria, and which focuses on the perspective of the immediate victims of antisemitism in everyday life.” The EUMC definition, Steinitz continued, therefore provided a “useful tool for a consistent recording of antisemitism.”

In practice, the automatism of context-free, content-based criteria produces a diverse mix of allegedly antisemitic actors in RIAS’s database: radical Islamists and Jewish organizations, neo-Nazis and Israeli political activists, artists, researchers of antisemitism, even Jews who themselves fled the Nazis — all of whom have, at one point or another, ticked a box on the organization’s checklist.<sup>42</sup>

### An antisemitic love story

Debate surrounding the situation in Israel-Palestine, and particularly criticisms of Israel therein, is a consistent source of statements that RIAS takes out of context and dubiously labels antisemitic. This dynamic arose in the second case study this chapter presents: the staging — and eventual cancellation — of “Birds of a Kind,” a play by Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad, at the Metropoltheater in Munich.

40 Juliane Wetzel, “Ein Kommentar zum Gutachten von Peter Ullrich über die ‘Working Definition of Antisemitism’ der International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).”

41 In fact, she co-authored the 2003 study “[Manifestations of anti-Semitism in the European Union](#),” which arguably gave rise to the original EUMC definition. The account of how the article led to the EUMC definition is described by Antony Lerman in his [blog post](#) from June 2, 2011.

42 Some examples include: the organization Jewish Voice for Just Peace in the Middle East (see RIAS joint [publication](#) with the organization IIBSA); the antisemitism researcher Prof. Moshe Zimmerman (see introduction); and the Austrian poet Erich Fried, who fled to London after his father was murdered by the Gestapo (see chapter 4).

The award-winning play tells the love story of an Arab character and a Jewish character, as they travel across several countries, while dealing with historical trauma and the conflict in the Middle East. It traveled far and wide before RIAS found that “antisemitic tropes permeate the play.”<sup>43</sup> Developed at a workshop by Israeli and Arab writers and actors with the support of the Israeli embassy, it premiered in Paris in 2017 with a mixed cast and was performed around the world — including at the Cameri Theater in Tel Aviv — to great acclaim. No accusations of antisemitism were made against the piece — or against its historical consultant, the distinguished Canadian-American-Jewish scholar Natalie Zemon Davis. In fact, the only protests against the play came from local BDS groups in [Switzerland](#) and [France](#), which opposed the Israeli state funding it received. Things changed, however, when the play arrived in Munich.

43 [Dimensionen des Antisemitismus in ‚Vögel‘ und in der Abwehr der Kritik, 2022, p. 2.](#)

After just four performances, “Birds of a Kind” [was shut down](#). Members of the Jewish Student Union of Germany were “appalled” by some remarks in the play and called for its cancellation, sparking a public debate. RIAS Bavaria seconded the students’ concerns, ruling in a [press release](#) that “based on the IHRA definition and taking into account the context immanent to the play, various passages of the performance are to be classified as antisemitic.” This press release was followed by an [eight-page analysis](#) that reached a similar conclusion.<sup>44</sup>

44 The analysis followed a [call](#) by the Bavarian antisemitism commissioner for “a close examination of the play.”

The analysis acknowledged that: “[i]ndividual statements by theater characters cannot be evaluated ... without context ... A work of art is created and stands in a social context, as does the discussion about it.” Yet RIAS disregarded the context of the Israeli-Arab cooperation behind the production and the successful performances in Tel Aviv. It also cited the guidance of Zemon Davis as evidence against the play — smearing her as a supporter of the “antisemitic” BDS campaign.<sup>45</sup>

45 In an email communication viewed by the author, Dr. Zemon Davis wrote: “I have never been a supporter of BDS. This is just a defamatory remark by the RIAS people.”

There is further relevant context that RIAS ignored. Dialogues in which Israeli characters discuss the Holocaust — comparing it to the repression of Palestinians, blaming their government for instrumentalizing it, or joking about it — were modeled after the way real Israelis often speak; for RIAS, however, these dialogues were incriminating cases of “Holocaust belittlement.” Acknowledging that such statements “can easily be dismissed as ‘irony,’ a ‘normal Jewish position,’ or ‘everyday language’ in Jewish families,” RIAS nonetheless doubled down on declaring them antisemitic, arguing in its analysis that “antisemitism is normalized precisely by the fact that it is spread by characters who are supposedly allowed to do so because they are Jewish or even Holocaust survivors.”

This last quote proves that RIAS is aware of the context of the statements it deemed antisemitic, and that its experts know that the dialogues, which were developed with Israeli writers, are realistic. The question therefore arises as to why they are presented as examples of antisemitism.

RIAS also accuses “Birds of a Kind” of demonization of Israel, citing a line in which the Israeli prime minister in the play responds to a terror attack by declaring that subsequent military operations are to be aimed at “eliminating the murderers that attacked our nation.” RIAS takes issue with the representation of the politician as “emotionless” and the Israeli reaction as “inhumane and excessive.”



Anyone familiar with Israeli politics, however, knows that this is not an antisemitic trope but rather a political cliché.<sup>46</sup>

RIAS also cites antisemitic references where there are none. When a Jewish figure in the play says, “I would rather not be a Palestinian today,” it evokes, for RIAS Hermann Göring’s quote from 1938, “I would not like to be a Jew in Germany.”<sup>47</sup> This comparison suggests a singular analytical lens so focused on identifying antisemitism that other meanings and interpretations become almost entirely crowded out; if all one has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

According to RIAS’s analysis, then, the play brims with antisemitism. The fact that this alleged antisemitism went undetected for five years, the organization claimed, boiled down to “whether there is a discerning eye for antisemitism in cultural newsrooms, and to what extent antisemitism is [a] normality, especially in the context of the so-called Middle East conflict.”

RIAS’s monitoring actively omits contextual information that can help evaluate an incident. Instead, the organization appears concerned solely with the bare text, which — devoid of any context, and under a microscope that occludes any meaning or motivation other than antisemitism — can indeed suggest antisemitic intent even where there is none.

### Eternalism and its risks

RIAS’s readiness to ignore the context of the incidents it documents is anchored in the organization’s eternalist understanding of antisemitism. In an [interview](#) with the Berlin magazine tip in 2018, RIAS founder Benjamin Steinitz detailed the organization’s approach in this regard. Responding to the question of whether RIAS distinguishes “between extreme right-wing antisemitism and Muslim antisemitism,” Steinitz said that “[t]here is, first and foremost, one antisemitism — which manifests itself in different contexts, but constitutes one worldview that has been reestablished over and over again in different regions of the world for 2,000 years.”

This view — that antisemitism is a single, immutable phenomenon with varying manifestations — is by no means unique to RIAS.<sup>48</sup> As noted above, academics term it the “eternity argument;” according to Prof. Uffa Jensen, a historian at the Center for Research on Antisemitism of the Technical University of Berlin, such a conception of antisemitism is based in “the assumption that hostility to Jews has actually always had the same structure since antiquity and can therefore also be called antisemitism indiscriminately.”<sup>49</sup>

When asked whether eternalism can be attributed to a particular political orientation, Jensen replied that while it has been put forth by scholars of varying views, for a “revisionist, right-wing Zionist school that includes historians such as Benzion Netanyahu [the father of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] and Robert S. Wistrich, ... [antisemitism] ... always plays a role that, in the logical consequence of the eternity argument, [means] Jewish life in the Diaspora actually makes no sense: indeed, it is dangerous and naive.”

Outside academia, applying the eternalist argument can have far-reaching consequences, particularly in relation to the more controversial incidents that RIAS documents. Moreover, if antisemitism is a single, homogenous force that

46 Similar remarks to the one voiced by the prime minister in the play have historically accompanied many military commands given by Israeli officials. In 2002, Foreign Affairs Minister Shimon Peres [called for](#) “exterminating the terror nests.” In 2014, Foreign Affairs Minister Avigdor Liberman [declared](#), “it is possible to eradicate Hamas.” In 2022, Defense Minister Benny Gantz [called](#) “to eradicate the threats built by our enemies.”

47 The two sentences are not even identical: “Ich wäre heute lieber kein Palästinenser;” “Ich möchte kein Jude in Deutschland sein.”

48 See, for example, Kenneth L. Marcus, *The Definition of Anti-Semitism*, 2015, p. 88.

49 Interview with author, conducted on January 7th, 2022.

always springs from the same well, it becomes meaningless to speak of different levels of threat: all incidents are different heads of the same hydra and therefore have the potential to be equally severe.

Disregarding the distinctions between different forms of antisemitism can therefore lend to the hyperbolization of the severity of a given incident. Consider the conclusion of the 2019 [report](#) by RIAS Berlin, which reported 881 incidents in the city including 33 attacks, 59 threats, etc. It was featured in a press release from Berlin's Minister of Justice, in a report from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, and in the media, which boiled these findings down to "two [antisemitic incidents] per day in Berlin."<sup>50</sup>

Some of these 881 incidents included cases such as the Feb. 27 discovery of "several stickers of the BDS campaign ('BOYCOTT APARTHEID MADE IN ISRAEL')" on a Berlin street; as well as a case that took place the following April, concerning a primary school student in Berlin-Friedenau who told an antisemitic joke in front of a Jewish child. In response to the joke, the student's teacher "reacted immediately and explained to the boy that this kind of content is unacceptable."<sup>51</sup>

Even if we accept that both these incidents are indeed antisemitic, putting them side by side is somewhat misleading. Furthermore, this was the same year in which a neo-Nazi gunman attempted to break into the synagogue in Halle during Yom Kippur prayers, providing a terrifying reminder of the violent potential of antisemitism. The 2019 numbers were published by RIAS in this context, creating the impression that attacks of equal severity to that of the Halle attacks might occur twice a day in the German capital.<sup>52</sup>

Political scientist Dr. Michael Kohlstruck has argued that homogenizing and essentializing antisemitism as a "trans-historical, identical substance," while remembering the Holocaust as its purest expression, ascribes "the nature of maximum danger" to any event tagged as antisemitic.<sup>53</sup> The result is emotional dramatization, in which "[t]he outrage over the historical genocide as a specific and special antisemitic phenomenon is employed for all other antisemitic phenomena." The indiscriminate use of the term antisemitism within an eternalist framework therefore puts "incidents that ... without this framing would be classified as petty crimes" on a spectrum with the Holocaust.<sup>54</sup>

This tactic indeed manifests in RIAS's reports and in references to incidents of antisemitism; all types of cases, big and small, are lumped together under a single, alarming title.

### Many opportunities

This theoretical approach has further consequences. If antisemitism is a single, constant phenomenon with varying manifestations, the context and the circumstances of any particular event are of secondary importance; an eternalist understanding of antisemitism thus further entrenches RIAS's policy of disregarding context, as discussed above.

To that end, RIAS seems to take the view that any given set of circumstances is a mere pretext for a perennial antisemitism. In the introduction to a [special publication](#) dedicated to the escalation in Gaza and wider civil unrest in Israel-Palestine in May 2021, RIAS noted the high number of incidents it had recorded and

50 Senatsverwaltung für Justiz, Verbraucherschutz und Antidiskriminierung, "Pressemitteilung vom 29.04.2020;" European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "Antisemitism: Overview of antisemitic incidents recorded in the European Union," 2020, p. 48; Deutsche Welle, "Germany: Anti-Semitism despite remembrance culture," May 7, 2020.

51 RIAS Chronicle, Feb. 26, 2019, and April 11, 2019.

52 See, for example, Times of Israel, "German monitor finds rise in anti-Semitic incidents after Halle synagogue attack," May 9, 2020.

53 Michael Kohlstruck, "Zur öffentlichen Thematisierung von Antisemitismus." In: Wolfgang Benz, Streitfall Antisemitismus: Anspruch auf Deutungsmacht und politische Interessen, Metropol: Berlin, 2020, p. 134.

54 Ibid., pp. 141-142



pointed out that the organization “observes the same dynamics over and over again.” It attributed the causes to “mostly exogenous factors like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, particular historical anniversaries, or social constellations;” these, along with the workings of social media, “establish[ed] the opportunity structure that motivates antisemitic agents and encourages incidents and violence.”<sup>55</sup>

This description presents its actors as de facto antisemitic and the result of their actions as antisemitism; cause and effect are essentially identical. The context — a violent episode in the Middle East, the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>56</sup> or any other “exogenous” trigger — is only marginally relevant to an analysis of a given incident. What is created in its absence is a mere “opportunity” for this eternal impulse to rear its head.

RIAS’s analysis of antisemitism thus forces one to question how exactly the organization intends to better our understanding of the phenomenon. After all, one of the organization’s goals, as the federal government explained when justifying its funding of RIAS, is to gain “additional insights that can help shed light on the overall picture of antisemitism in Germany, particularly in order to lay a better foundation for more focused prevention work.”<sup>57</sup> If contextual factors are dismissed as no more than a conduit for an unchanging and unrelenting force, what lessons are there to learn, and how can these lessons support the prevention of future incidents?<sup>58</sup>

An approach that detaches incidents from their real-life circumstances, and dismisses them as mere “opportunities” can actually lead to less clarity about the sources of antisemitism and how to tackle them. Moreover, says Jensen of the Center for Research on Antisemitism, this approach strips antisemitic moments of their deeper political roots. “I am convinced that antisemitism is quite often part of a political program, a political ideology,” he says. “If everything, regardless of which side it comes from, is to be regarded indiscriminately as the same antisemitism, then in my view this threatens to depoliticize the study of antisemitism. The increasing public emphasis on a moral dimension, according to which antisemitism is the problem of an evil personality, contributes to this.”

### No need to reason

Deeming a concrete event with its own context to be an empty vehicle for something else (i.e. antisemitism) becomes even more problematic when that context is explicitly political. In such cases — controversial as they may be — brushing off the context as irrelevant serves to foreclose political discussion, occlude salient facts, and possibly silence opposing narratives and arguments.

One such example came in June 2021, when RIAS declared that the discovery of a car in Bamberg that had a rear window sticker “in the form of the territory between [the River] Jordan and the Mediterranean [Sea] ... [including] present-day Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip” amounted to an antisemitic incident. Given that the area depicted was labeled “Palestine” in Arabic, RIAS claimed that sticker was antisemitic since it implied that “Israel is therefore not allowed to exist.”<sup>59</sup>

The map motif is by no means an outlier in RIAS’s database, appearing often in its publications and reports. Yet the organization’s reasons for including it are

55 Explanations along these lines appear in several RIAS publications.

56 “‘The pandemic became a social opportunity structure for antisemitism,’ analyzes Benjamin Steinitz from RIAS.” In: *“Antisemitismus: Die Pandemie als Vorwand,”* Neues Deutschland, April 19, 2021.

57 *“Abschlussbericht des Kabinettsausschusses zur Bekämpfung von Rechtsextremismus und Rassismus,”* May 14, 2021, p. 45.

58 RIAS does publish conclusions from its work, but, given how the statistics cited therein are de-contextualized, they remain at the surface level. See, for example, the “four theses” published by the organization’s academics, based on its work in Berlin between 2017–19: 1. Antisemitism appears in all districts, in different spaces, and comes from very different political spectrums. 2. The number of incidents does not grow continuously, but certain developments can be observed when certain “circumstances and debates ... motivate antisemitic perpetrators and enable antisemitic violence,” for example U.S. President Donald Trump’s decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. 3. All types of antisemitic content (anti-Jewish, anti-Israel, othering, etc.) can be found in all political spectrums. 4. The number of antisemitic incidents that threaten Jews has grown between 2017–19. Daniel Poensgen and Julia Kopp, *“Alltagsprägende Dynamiken: Antisemitische Vorfälle in Deutschland.”*

59 RIAS Bayern, *Facebook*, June 20, 2021. The incident was reported on the Amadeu Antonio Foundation’s *timeline*.

flimsy and one-sided at best. Since both sides lay claim to the same territory, Israelis and Palestinians have long produced the exact same map, labeling it with their respective names for the territory. In fact, the same contours described above, ignoring the Palestinian territories, are the ones familiar to Israelis in everyday contexts — from weather forecast maps in the media to governmental publications.<sup>60</sup>

This sticker was produced in a rich context: it is a tool of “counter-mapping” commonly used in territorial conflicts. But it also forms part of a nationalist discourse and its symbolism; not least, it bears emotional significance and communicates a sense of identity for the members of the Palestinian diaspora, many of whom are descendants of those exiled by Israel in 1948.<sup>61</sup>

All this nuanced context and history evaporates, however, as soon as the sticker is framed as just another manifestation of antisemitism. RIAS presents the conflict in the Middle East as merely a pretext for “antisemitic agents” which makes the identities, experiences, and narratives of these agents unworthy of attention, much less validation. Their actions contain no real message or appeal; rather, they are just a vehicle for eternal antisemitism. Allegations about Israeli war crimes, apartheid policies and practices, and structural racism are thus dismissed as a modern version of blood libels, well-poisoning, and Elders of Zion conspiracies — a modern spin on a 2,000-year-old tale.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, [this publication](#) by the Education Ministry, or [this one](#) by the Health Ministry. The Israeli policy to erase the Green Line, which demarcates the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, is the result of a secret governmental decision taken months after Israel occupied these territories in 1967. The secret documents were recently released; see: Akevot, “[Erasure of the Green Line](#),” June 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Yair Wallach, “Trapped in mirror-images: The rhetoric of maps in Israel/Palestine,” *Political Geography* 30 (2011), pp. 358–369.

### 3 Data without details

RIAS publishes prolifically on its [website](#) and [social media](#). This chapter examines the different reports and communication channels RIAS uses and how they reflect the organization's biases.

Each section below discusses one type of publication. The first, an example of an “initial exploration report,” points to an overemphasis on Israel-related antisemitism. The second argues that RIAS's annual reports obscure important information and leave the public with confusing statistics. The third examines RIAS's timeline of antisemitic incidents and its inclusion of duplications and repetitions. Finally, this chapter argues that RIAS's lack of transparency around its methodologies and data sources seriously undermines its work.

#### Political spectrums in the dark

RIAS usually starts new local chapters by conducting a survey among the Jewish community to assess existing knowledge and perceptions of antisemitism in a given state, as well as by collecting antisemitism statistics from local NGOs and the police.<sup>62</sup>

One such local chapter was founded in September 2020 in Thuringia, a central German state that is considered a bastion of the far right. The state has a flourishing neo-Nazi scene whose infamous rock concerts and criminal activity have long preoccupied law enforcement and the general public. Thuringia is also home to an extremist faction of the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD), led by Björn Höcke, who, according to a German court ruling, can legally be described as a [fascist](#). The local party is monitored by the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution due to its “proven” [right-wing extremism](#); nonetheless, in the 2021 federal election, it became the strongest force in Thuringia, winning nearly a quarter of votes cast. In June 2023, it also gained its first-ever governing position, winning more than 52 percent of the votes in a district election in the state. Incidentally, Thuringia is the German state with the [lowest proportion](#) of people with a migration background and is home to the country's second-smallest Jewish community, with only [667 registered members](#), mostly of retirement age.

RIAS began its work in Thuringia by collecting data on all known antisemitic incidents in the state from 2014–19. It collected information from a variety of sources: incidents recorded by the parent organization, information from the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, and statistics from two government-funded

<sup>62</sup> See: [Podium discussion presenting the work of RIAS Thuringia](#), April 7, 2021.

NGOs — [Mobile Counseling](#) (MOBIT e.V.) and [Ezra](#) (Hebrew for “help”) — both of which are aimed at countering right-wing extremism, racism, and antisemitism in Thuringia, and both of which offer portals for reporting incidents and publish their documentation online. In its publication, “[Antisemitism in Thuringia – First findings](#),” the organization reported a total of 126 incidents in the 5½ years surveyed, including four attacks and eight cases of threats. Individuals “of Jewish background” were affected by antisemitic incidents — the nature of which are not elaborated upon — in only five of the 126 total incidents reported, that is, less than once a year.

Any number of antisemitic incidents at all are, of course, cause for concern; moreover, as the authors of the report point out, “‘antisemitism without Jews’ can be understood as a specific feature of regions without a large Jewish population.” Yet these statistics also raise the question as to what value RIAS adds to the existing monitoring of antisemitism by Mobile Counseling and Ezra.

The organization is clear about the gaps it wishes to fill. First, RIAS insists that the pre-existing surveillance of antisemitism in the state “represent[s] only a fraction of the antisemitic incidents in Thuringia.” The existing chronicles “mainly record antisemitism in the context of right-wing extremism and neo-Nazism.” As such, the organization says that the statistics miss antisemitism “in the Islamic spectrum ... in the left-wing spectrum ... and in the ‘center’ of the population.” More specifically, RIAS emphasizes that the existent focus on far-right antisemitism overlooks “Israel-related antisemitism.”

Second, RIAS notes that, for the most part, only violent or “otherwise criminally relevant” incidents are documented, and it argues that all of them should be collected, regardless of medium or legality. Third, the organization says that the recorded incidents “have not yet been the subject of scholarly contextualization and analysis.”

RIAS Thuringia presented three examples to justify its focus on incidents involving Israel:

- 1 A 10-person demonstration that took place in Jena in 2017, where BDS signs were displayed. The organizer, quoted in a [newspaper article](#) cited by RIAS, explained that “nothing like a regional BDS exists in Jena,” and that this was her own spontaneous initiative.
- 2 “Anti-Israeli Pamphlets” distributed by the German Marxist-Leninist Party (MLPD) in 2019 on the grounds of the Buchenwald Memorial.<sup>63</sup>
- 3 Comments made in 2017 by Jena’s mayor, Albrecht Schröter, who argued against the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and in favor of labeling products from Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.<sup>64</sup>

63 The MLPD [successfully sued](#) against this characterization in a similar publication.

64 RIAS cites a critical [statement](#) by the Israeli-German Association. The condemned speech can be found [here](#).

Taking this evidence into account, RIAS Thuringia declared its overarching goal to be the “document[ation] and counter[ing of] all antisemitic incidents in the future, regardless of their political background and motives, and [the] confront[ation of] them.”

RIAS Thuringia’s [first annual report](#), which was based on its own monitoring of antisemitic incidents in 2021, flagged 27 percent of incidents as Israel-related

antisemitism. The report provides no information on these incidents and, unusually for RIAS, neglects to reference any examples at all.

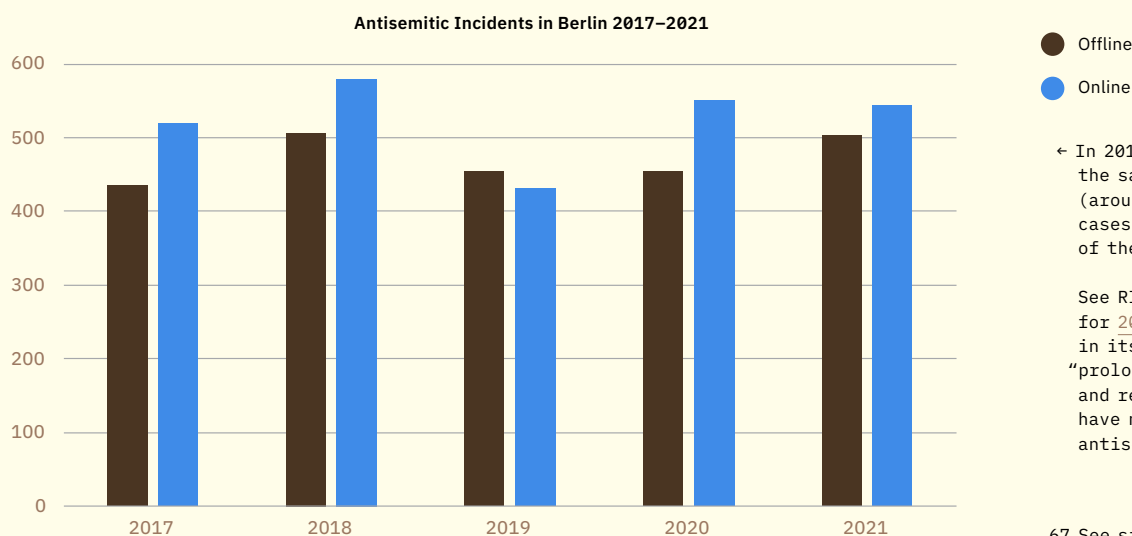
According to RIAS's summary of antisemitism in 2021, the final breakdown of the alleged perpetrators' political affiliations was 37 percent extreme right wing, 25 percent unknown, and 19 percent anti-Israel activism. In a state where thousands of Nazis gather for events such as "[Rock against foreign infiltration](#)," and where the [intelligence services](#) identified more than 2000 individuals to be active rightwing extremists, this might sound surprising. For comparison, in 2021, Thuringia's police [documented](#) 64 antisemitic offenses, associating all but one incident—which lacked a clear political connection—with right-wing extremism. A Thuringian social scientist who knows the field well and wished to remain anonymous commented: "In a federal state with a fascist party in parliament, it actually requires an explanation if only a third of the antisemitic incidents can be attributed to the right-wing scene. Targeted research into the 'Alternative for Germany' circles (instead of relying on random reports) would immediately shift the emphasis."<sup>65</sup>

65 Phone interview with the author, Oct. 7, 2021.

66 RIAS Berlin's annual reports for 2020 and 2019 report that 33.7 percent of the 886 incidents in 2019 were labeled Israel-related, totaling 298 cases. There were 454 offline cases in 2019; only 13.2 percent of these were labeled Israel-related, amounting to 60 offline Israel-related cases. This means the other 238 were online—making up 79.9 percent of the incidents flagged as Israel-related.

## Online spaces

An often-overlooked aspect of RIAS's reports is that the majority of the recorded incidents often take place online. Moreover, taking the organization's Berlin reports as an example, it is evident that in recent years the online cases are responsible for most of the fluctuation in incident numbers:



● Offline

● Online

← In 2019 and 2020 there were almost the same number of "offline cases" (around 450). The rise of total cases from 886 to 1004 is a result of the rise in online cases.

See RIAS Berlin's annual reports for 2020 and 2019. RIAS argues in its 2020 report that "prolonged periods of lockdown and restrictions on public life have not led to a decrease in antisemitic incidents."

In specific categories, the ratio is even higher: 77 percent of incidents tagged as "Israel-related" took place online, for example, through emails or comments on social media. In 2019, it was 80 percent.<sup>66</sup> These numbers manifest in headlines such as "[More than a thousand antisemitic incidents reported in Berlin](#)," offering a misleading impression of the nature of the problem in the city.<sup>67</sup>

Clarification is needed as to what qualifies as an online incident. RIAS claims to follow strict criteria to determine which online cases it includes in its reports, counting only those in which "antisemitic statements ... directly address a specific person or institution."<sup>68</sup>

The data shows that the party on the receiving end of an allegedly antisemitic statement could be anything or anyone—from the Twitter account of a federal

67 See similar headlines, such as: Der Spiegel, "[Rund tausend antisemitische Vorfälle registriert](#)," April 19, 2021. Such headlines appear regularly in the press following new publications by RIAS. The high number of Jewish and Israeli institutions in the German capital with an online presence explains, in part, these seemingly significant numbers.

68 "[Problembeschreibung Antisemitismus in Sachsen](#)," See also [remarks](#) by Rebecca Seidler, co-founder of RIAS Federal Association, at an online panel of the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, Oct. 19, 2021.

parliamentary caucus to a non-Jewish “antisemitism critic.”<sup>69</sup> Statements can include any text on social media, including comments on Facebook posts, private messages on dating apps, replies to tweets, or tags on Instagram. Sometimes they even appear on Google Maps, as was the case in 2019 when, “an Israeli restaurant received an antisemitic Google review, which stated: ‘Those who want to have REAL falafel go to the Arab not to the Jew.’”<sup>70</sup>

69 RIAS Chronicle, July 22, 2020.

RIAS’s complex classification and categorization policy includes: three levels of geographical specification (for example, city, neighborhood, and type of place, like “synagogue”); affected parties (institution, individual, or none) and a sub-categorization thereof (Jewish, non-Jewish, politician, etc); the type of antisemitism expressed (“modern,” “anti-Jewish,” “Israel-related,” etc.); and the political background of the alleged perpetrator, as far as that can be determined (“extreme/populist right,” “conspiratorial,” “anti-Israel activism,” “Islam/Islamism,” “political center,” “left/anti-imperialism,” and “Christian/Christian fundamentalism”).

70 RIAS Chronicle, April 1, 2019.

These categories, together with the incidents’ timestamps, allows for countless statistical analyses, which RIAS shares in abundance. A typical paragraph in the organization’s 70-page [2020 report for Berlin](#) reads:

The 176 Jewish and Israeli individuals affected by antisemitic incidents are attributable to a total of 146 incidents, 14.1 percent more than the previous year (128). Among these incidents are nine attacks, six [incidents of] targeted property damage, 14 threats, 82 cases of hurtful behavior, and 35 mass letters. Although the number of attacks and threats against Jews and Israelis decreased from the previous highs in 2019 (17 attacks, 21 threats), RIAS Berlin documented more antisemitic incidents affecting Jewish and Israeli individuals overall than in any other year since 2015.

These analyses are insightful, but they are presented in a tortuous and confusing way; moreover, it is unfortunate that RIAS does not release its full database in anonymized form to allow researchers direct access to the data and the option to answer the questions they are interested in pursuing.

One such question might be: how many Jews were affected by “offline” antisemitism, i.e. not on social media? This straightforward question is not answered in the Berlin 2020 report. Instead, we learn that:

- / 180 incidents (affecting Jews and non-Jews) included face-to-face interactions.
- / 348 individuals were affected in total, including online.
- / 176 Jews were affected in 146 incidents, 64 of which occurred online.<sup>71</sup>

71 Pages 17, 18, and 43 of the Berlin 2020 report, respectively.

One can surmise from these details that a little over 100 Jews were affected by antisemitism in real-life situations. An exact answer, however, isn’t provided. (This is a potentially enlightening detail given that, in some years, the majority of the victims of antisemitism documented by RIAS were not Jewish.)<sup>72</sup>

72 Consider, for example, how, in 2019, the organization recorded 164 Jews out of 329 individual victims and, in 2017, 98 Jews out of 245 individual victims.



## What actually happened

Another detail somewhat lost in the sea of statistical segmentations and analyses concerns the nature of the incidents themselves: what actually happened? RIAS partially addresses this gap by providing examples of cases from the different categories, but they hardly paint a full picture. These omissions can be filled out, however, with help from another source: RIAS’s chronicle.

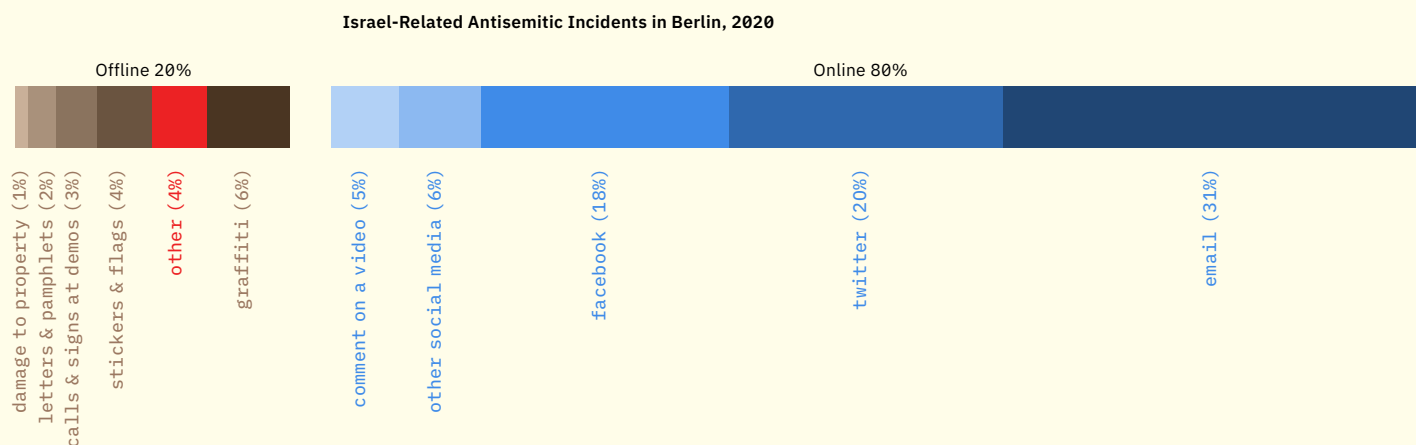
On its website, RIAS published a selection of the incidents that inform its statistics. This selection is broad enough to offer a glimpse into the database.<sup>73</sup> At the time of this report’s writing, RIAS’s chronicle included 1,981 incidents, which occurred mainly between 2019 and 2021. Every incident appears with an exact date, a place (neighborhood or “online”), a short description, and the type of antisemitism according to RIAS’s classification.

The most populated category in the timeline is Israel-related antisemitic incidents in Berlin in 2020. Of the 264 such cases mentioned in the annual report, 238 of them (90 percent) are available in the chronicle. The following cases are typical examples of how RIAS describes the incidents it documents:

- / “On June 16, a graffiti was discovered in Kreuzberg, in which a Star of David was drawn above the writing ‘BDS.’”
- / “On October 5, a Palestinian flag with the writing ‘Apartheid no more’ and a raised fist was discovered in Neukölln. The flag was attached to a building’s facade from an apartment.”

<sup>73</sup> This practice aims to protect the privacy of the victims and is in line with other organizations in the field. The Anti-Defamation League publishes a sample on its [audit](#) in a format similar to RIAS’s. The U.K.-based [Community Security Trust](#) (CST) does not publish any incidents online outside its periodic reports; the same is true for the French [Service de Protection de la Communauté Juive](#), the Dutch [Centrum informatie en documentatie Israel](#), and the Austrian [Forum gegen Antisemitismus](#), all of which provide a reporting portal. A spokesperson for the CST clarified that the organization might help with specific inquiries but would not provide anonymized source data.

Reading through these incidents, the following breakdown can be suggested:



The question of what actually happened in the antisemitic incidents in RIAS’s statistics barely factors into press coverage of the organization’s reports. For example, a Jerusalem Post article, headlined “[Report finds rise in antisemitic incidents in Germany](#),” on RIAS’s 2020 report noted that “the report documents an average of 159 incidents per month in Germany in 2020, which makes [for] over five incidents per day.”

While rightly foregrounding the more grave incidents, news outlets tend to use RIAS’s data to contextualize the events without necessarily knowing exactly what these data refer to. A typical example is the Associated Press article, “[Assaults, arson, slurs: Report finds anti-Semitism in Berlin](#),” which starts by

describing an arson attack on a Jewish-run bar and refers to a RIAS report that “documented 410 incidents — more than two a day — during the first half of 2020.” The article then provides RIAS’s breakdown of these incidents, from the six cases of physical assault to the 301 incidents of “malicious behavior such as giving the stiff-armed Nazi salute.”

The rest of the article discusses the attempted attack on a synagogue in Halle in 2019; desecrated graves; a man who shouted, “Heil Hitler!” at a Jewish woman; a swastika that was spray painted on a restaurant; and 10 Stolpersteine (miniature brass memorial plaques installed into the sidewalk outside the former homes of Jews who perished in the Holocaust) that were painted black. The article paints a grim picture, without a doubt. But RIAS’s failure to accurately communicate the nature of the incidents their statistics cover — i.e. *what actually happened* — means that news outlets reporting on these statistics often end up presenting an over-dramatized portrait of antisemitism.

**rbb 24** Politik Wirtschaft Kultur Sport Panorama Ukraine

Bericht 2021 der Informationsstelle RIAS

## Drei antisemitische Vorfälle in Berlin - und zwar pro Tag

Di 24.05.22 | 22:08 Uhr

2

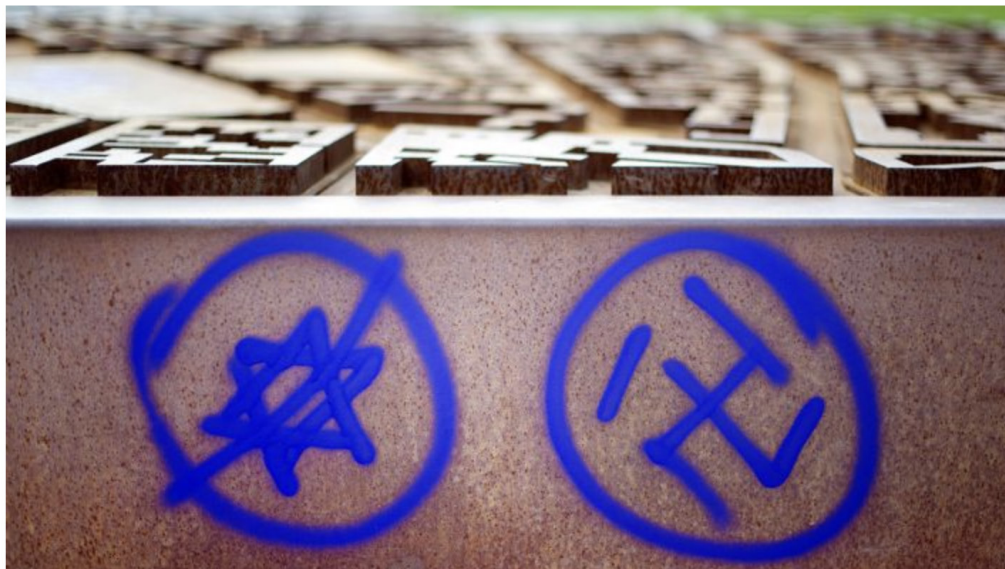


Bild: dpa/Daniel Reinhardt

← 2021 Report of the Information Center RIAS—“Three antisemitic incidents in Berlin—and this every day.” Screenshot from the Berlin-Brandenburg Public Broadcaster Website.

### What actually happened, and how many times?

RIAS’s policy regarding duplication in its reporting of online incidents is unclear. Do the three chronicle entries relating to a Nov. 9, 2020 incident, in which “a Jewish organization received antisemitic comments on a Facebook post,” describe three different comments on the same post? Do the four identical records for Oct. 6, 2020 regarding “a Jewish institution [that] received an antisemitic email” describe the same email sent to several institutions? The timeline includes many such examples whose minimal descriptions make it hard to understand how many actual posts and emails were reported.



In fact, RIAS's descriptions of online cases are especially opaque, even though many of them originate in public posts on social media. For example, 26 incidents reported between August and December 2020 appear as a batch with the identical description: "A Jewish institution received an antisemitic comment on a video." Similar templates refer to "an antisemitic reply to a tweet," "an antisemitic comment on a Facebook post," and so on.

RIAS itself explained one type of duplication at a [press conference](#) in June 2022, where the Thuringian chapter presented its [first annual report](#) documenting 212 antisemitic incidents in the state. Thirty-five of the incidents (17 percent) were emails related to the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>74</sup> which were sent to the Institute for Democracy and Civil Society (IDZ), to which RIAS Thuringia belongs. According to Dr. Anja Thiele, head of RIAS Thuringia, 90 percent of these emails were sent by a single author. In other words, 15 percent of the registered antisemitic incidents in Thuringia in 2021 occurred in private correspondence between a single person and the organization that documents antisemitism in Thuringia. This detail did not find its way into media coverage the next day, which featured blunt headlines, such as "[More Than 200 Antisemitic Incidents in 2021](#)."<sup>75</sup>

Potential duplication is an issue in RIAS's "offline" statistics, too. As a telling example, RIAS documented 19 antisemitic incidents in the first half of 2019, all committed by "a man" — the same man — who displayed antisemitic signs in different locations in Berlin reading, for example, "Nazi means National-Zionist," and, "The royal family of Saudi Arabia is Zionist." These actions accounted for more than a quarter of the "offline" Israel-related incidents in Berlin that year. RIAS points out that in one of these cases, even though the police were called, they were unable to take action, "because the man was not criminally accountable."<sup>76</sup>

RIAS's partners acknowledge the potential for individual actors to single-handedly drive up antisemitism statistics. In 2018, Kati Becker — a coordinator at Berliner Register, an organization that documents racist, antisemitic, and homophobic incidents in Berlin, and which cooperates closely with RIAS — explained to the Berlin parliament that "a man" (possibly the same one discussed above, and whose photo appears in RIAS's [2017 report](#)): "runs to all kinds of demonstrations with signs he ties around himself, on which he presents antisemitic conspiracy theories ... He does this several times a week. This is also always documented. That contributes 150 incidents over the year."<sup>77</sup>

A similar case in point pertains to a sticker promoting a neo-Nazi party, [Der III. Weg](#) ("The Third Path"), which circulated in Berlin at the end of 2020. RIAS documented five different cases involving this sticker, since it was spotted in five different places on five different occasions. Such cases beg the question of what constitutes an "incident" and whether the fact that RIAS "discovered" each of the stickers separately justifies their documentation as standalone incidents.

More broadly, these cases raise questions as to whether RIAS's statistical methods can truly capture the state of antisemitism at any given time, given how they flatten a complex social phenomenon into numerical data. As one interviewee who has worked with the organization commented: "the problem is that [RIAS] privilege[s] the quantitative over the qualitative, because it works better in publications and in the press. Once it's on a chart, it's a fact."<sup>78</sup>

74 [RIAS Thuringia Annual Report 2021](#). RIAS flagged as antisemitic incidents any case in which: the word "non-vaccinated" appeared inside a yellow Star of David; doctors administering vaccinations were compared to the SS physician and torturer Josef Mengele; "Auschwitz" was sprayed on vaccination centers; mask mandates were compared to the treatment of Jews under the Nazis, etc.

75 See for example: Thüringer Allgemeine, "[Über 200 antisemitische Vorfälle in 2021 – kaum Vertrauen in Behörden](#)," June 7, 2022.

76 [RIAS Chronicle](#): Jan. 11, 2019, Jan. 31, 2019, Feb. 9, 2019, Feb. 21, 2019, March 12, 2019, March 13, 2019, March 18, 2019, March 31, 2019, April 2, 2019, April 6, 2019, April 13, 2019, April 15, 2019, April 17, 2019, April 4, 2019, May 6, 2019, May 9, 2019, May 18, 2019, May 19, 2019, May 24, 2019, June 7, 2019.

77 [Minutes](#), March 21, 2018, p. 5.

78 Interview, Oct. 29, 2021.

## 4 Biased practices

The scholarly style of RIAS's output often belies the degree to which opinion and interpretation inform its work. To illustrate this dynamic, this chapter presents a case study of a demonstration in Munich that RIAS classified as antisemitic. This example raises further concerns about the shortcomings of RIAS's reporting methods that were laid out throughout this report, including: the liberal interpretation of definitions; the disregard for context when classifying antisemitism; the anonymization of non-personal data in the publication, which limits the possibility of criticism; and the duplication of incidents that significantly inflates the antisemitism statistics.

### One possible interpretation

Many of the incidents RIAS documents are recorded at protests, which the organization regularly observes. Here is a typical example of how RIAS describes such incidents:

#### **Israel accused of racism, land grab and occupation, among other things, at an anti-Zionist rally**

A rally that took place on July 10, 2020, in Munich called for an end to Israeli "occupation." The group organizing the rally didn't clarify what this accusation referred to. A call to annihilate Israel, i.e. the view that the entire Israeli state is an illegal occupation, thus remains at least one possible interpretation. This is also suggested by the visible slogan, "Stop a second Nakba." Nakba is the term used by anti-Zionists to describe the founding of the Israeli state, which was allegedly accompanied by deliberate displacement and extermination of Palestinians. The Israel boycott movement BDS, whose mascot "Handala" could be seen depicted on several shirts in the crowd, makes similar delegitimizing statements.

Further, one sign could be seen that said "Israel, chosen for racism and land grab?" which, besides the delegitimizing accusations of engaging in racism and land grab, contains a religious reference to Israel as a people chosen by god, thus creating a link between anti-Zionist antisemitism and anti-Judaism.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>79</sup> [RIAS Chronicle](#), July 10, 2020.

The scare quotes around “occupation” and the assertion that the deliberate displacement of Palestinians in 1948 is a mere allegation are themselves revealing. But this kind of example, which appears consistently in RIAS’s database, also showcases an important aspect of how the organization puts its definitions to work.

In its classification work, RIAS mainly relies on two definitions: the IHRA definition of Antisemitism and former Knesset member and Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky’s “3D test” (“Demonization, Double Standards, Delegitimization”), used “for the distinction of Israel-related antisemitism from criticism of Israeli politics.”<sup>80</sup>

But as per its description of this protest, RIAS did not spot anything antisemitic at the rally, even according to its own definitions. Nobody seems to have argued that “Israel is a racist endeavor,” the most relevant example of Israel-related antisemitism in the IHRA definition; rather, as RIAS itself concluded, the state was accused of “engaging in racism.” Therefore, neither its right to exist nor the Jewish right to self-determination were denied by the protestors; nor did they apply any double standards by requiring of Israel “behavior not expected of any other democratic nation,” another relevant IHRA example.

Delegitimization, according to the “3D test,” means denying “Israel’s fundamental right to exist,”<sup>81</sup> which is different from criticism of state policies, as Sharansky himself explained.<sup>82</sup> Demonization of Israel means ascribing to it evil attributes that reference the demonic powers or intentions that “classic” antisemitism ascribes to Jews.<sup>83</sup> It can also mean blowing Israel’s actions “out of all sensible proportion; [such as] when comparisons are made between Israelis and Nazis and between Palestinian refugee camps and Auschwitz.”<sup>84</sup> RIAS did not record such statements at the rally; only through the use of its own unconventional interpretation of the Nakba as an “extermination” could RIAS have imputed indirect demonization.<sup>85</sup>

The one sign asking whether Israel was “chosen for racism and land grab” could be linked to the IHRA example of “using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel.” Conflating the Jewish state with Judaism is problematic, and classic antisemitism did denounce the idea of Jewish “chosenness.” But it is not in and of itself an example of the kind of classic antisemitic imagery cited in the IHRA definition, and in the context of the protest, the link seems weak.<sup>86</sup>

Ultimately, it appears the Munich protest was deemed antisemitic solely due to “one possible interpretation” of statements observed during the event. As we have seen, RIAS considered the term “occupation” too vague, and viewed it as potentially calling for the annihilation of the state — which would fall foul of the “3D test.” The burden of proof in this instance fell on the anonymous protesters; without their own explanation of their use of the word “occupation,” their rally has remained listed in RIAS’s timeline as an antisemitic gathering.

### Another possible interpretation

In keeping with its policy of anonymizing non-personal data, RIAS did not name the group involved in the protest discussed above. However, the event it described as both “anti-Zionist” and antisemitic could only have been held by the [Munich branch of the Women in Black](#), a long-running anti-occupation group and Nobel

80 See: [RIAS Berlin Annual Report 2019](#).

81 Natan Sharansky, “3D Test of Anti-Semitism: Demonization, Double Standards, Delegitimization,” [Foreword of Jewish Political Studies Review 16:3-4](#) (Fall 2004).

82 “While criticism of an Israeli policy may not be anti-Semitic, the denial of Israel’s right to exist is always anti-Semitic.” Natan Sharansky, [Testimony at the Helsinki Commission](#), 2004.

83 Kenneth L. Marcus comments on this aspect of the 3D Test: “The term [demonization] is frequently misused in contemporary discourse to describe particularly biting or extreme criticisms, especially if they portray their object in an especially negative light.” Marcus 2015, p. 156.

84 [Sharansky, Testimony](#).

85 Nakba is not defined as the extermination of Palestinians but as their displacement and the destruction of their homeland. See, for example, Hussein Ibish, “A ‘Catastrophe’ That Defines Palestinian Identity,” [The Atlantic](#), May 14, 2018.

86 Israelis and Israeli politicians often conflate Israel and the Jewish people, and they even speak openly about Jewish chosenness, like in [this speech](#) by a member of the Israeli parliament.

Peace Prize nominee which was founded in Israel.

Women in Black's inaugural protest took place in 1988, at the height of the First Intifada, when a group of Jewish-Israeli women from all walks of life gathered one Friday afternoon at a central plaza in Jerusalem with now-iconic large black signs reading, "Stop the Occupation" — the same slogan in which RIAS detected antisemitism. Undaunted by the curses and threats from passing drivers, the group continued to meet every Friday at the same place, under the same banner — and they still do.

Sister organizations sprang up around the globe. The Munich Women in Black group was formed more than 30 years ago, and they have staged a vigil every second and fourth Friday of the month ever since. "Fifteen to 20 women attend regularly," says Elfi Padovan, the group's organizer and a veteran of the German peace movement.<sup>87</sup> Some Jewish women take part in the vigils, too. "We are standing here for peace, for both Palestinians and Israelis," adds Padovan. Accusations of antisemitism, which "pop up every now and again," do not surprise her anymore. Even a local far-right group accused them of antisemitism once, she recalls.

87 Phone interview with the author, December 2021.

Of the 19 Israel-related incidents in Bavaria in 2020 described in detail by RIAS, the Munich vigils of Women in Black contributed five. That said, 25 other cases of Israel-related antisemitism are mentioned in the statistics of that year without any description at all, leaving it unclear how many times those vigils were actually registered. If RIAS took consistent record — that is, at each of the biweekly vigils — the group of mostly older women may have contributed to as many as 24 incidents that year. This would mean they were responsible for 10 percent of the antisemitic incidents in Bavaria and over 50 percent of the Israel-related ones.<sup>88</sup>

88 Not all of the antisemitic incidents registered by RIAS appear on their online timeline. According to the report, "Antisemitic Incidents in Bayern 2020," a total of 44 cases of Israel-related antisemitism were recorded; only 19 appeared in the chronicle.

The vigils' case descriptions, which are supposed to establish their antisemitic background, reveal much about RIAS's understanding of antisemitism. The evidence brought against the Women included.<sup>89</sup>

89 The following is an exhaustive list of the evidence that appears in various RIAS publications and the chronicle regarding incidents related to the Munich-based chapter of the Women in Black.

- / A flier that was circulated at the demonstration which stated that Israel is "a state without a constitution and without set borders." (RIAS: "An impression can arise that Israel lacks some modern constitutional and democratic principles.")<sup>90</sup>
- / Language within the same flier, which argued that, due to the Holocaust, Israel has been granted special status that allows it to dismiss human rights and international law without being criticized. (RIAS: "Israel's 'self-defense' appears in double quotes, belittling the threats and the repeated attempts by its many neighbors to annihilate the Jewish state.")
- / A demand made at the demonstration for peace talks between all parties involved in the conflict on an equal footing, including Hamas, and that Israel give up its claim to being an exclusively Jewish state from the river to the sea. (RIAS: "Not only does Israel not demand that, but it has also repeatedly made offers based on a two-state-solution to the Palestinian side.")

90 To this day Israel does not have a constitution or set borders.

- / A [poem](#) by the exiled Austrian Jew, Erich Fried, “Hear, O Israel!” which was displayed at the demonstration and included the allegedly demonizing verse: “Your desire / was to become powerful, like the nations / who murdered you; / now you have, indeed, become like them.”<sup>91</sup>
- / A second flier, which called for support of the BDS campaign, that circulated at the demonstration. (RIAS: “Among other things, BDS argues falsely that Israeli Arab citizens do not have the same rights as Jews.”)<sup>91</sup>
- / A [poem](#) by Günther Grass, written on the occasion of a German delivery of nuclear submarines to Israel and published in 2012 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, that was also displayed; in it, Grass writes that Israel’s nuclear powers endanger a fragile world peace. (RIAS: “This idea ... attributes a sinister power to the small country.”)
- / A protester’s t-shirt that portrayed the entire territory of Israel-Palestine in the Palestinian national colors and under the slogan “Free Palestine.” (RIAS: “The shirt expresses the wish to abolish the Jewish state.”)<sup>92</sup>

91 According to Elfi Padovan, this and the other fliers mentioned in the list are not official materials of the Women in Black. The Munich Women in Black chapter is not affiliated with BDS.

92 The t-shirt was the only piece of evidence used to label this specific demonstration as antisemitic.

RIAS’s “evidence” against the Munich Women in Black highlights how a particular understanding of antisemitism can be used to delegitimize one political narrative while reinforcing another. The context of the Women’s background, principles, and arguments are deemed inessential (see chapter 2). Instead, their decontextualized statements are used as a springboard to instruct the readers of RIAS’s reports on geopolitical questions, the history of the conflict, and other internal Israeli affairs — all with a slant that is almost entirely aligned with the Israeli government.

### Interpretation is for experts

Flagging a vigil against the occupation as antisemitic on the grounds RIAS cited — because the term “occupation” was not clarified, and because Israel’s lack of a constitution was highlighted — requires a high degree of interpretive license.

Scholarship on antisemitism largely concurs that anti-Jewish bigotry often does not manifest exclusively in direct, “traditional” statements. The tabooization of antisemitism in public discourse, especially in Germany, represses the overt expression of prejudice against Jews and encourages antisemites to express their prejudices in coded and indirect statements.<sup>93</sup> German scholars view criticism of the State of Israel as a prominent example of this “indirect communication,” and RIAS sees its efforts to record and decipher “coded” antisemitism as an essential part of its work.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, RIAS stresses that the public and the authorities alike struggle to see coded antisemitism for what it is.<sup>95</sup>

Given that the deciphering of antisemitic codes lies at the core of classification work, the question arises as to who has the authority to interpret an action or statement as coded antisemitism, and what is the basis for such an interpretation? Further, given the far-reaching implications and the risk of politicization involved in the interpretation of these codes, what assurances are there that a given interpretation is unbiased, and what processes are in place to validate it?

RIAS sees its own staff, who are interviewed by and quoted in the press, as the experts responsible for interpreting antisemitism, deciphering antisemitic expressions, and alerting the public to antisemitic dog whistles.

93 Michael Kohlstruck and Peter Ullrich, “Antisemitismus als Problem und Symbol: Phänomene und Interventionen in Berlin,” 2015, p. 20; Marcus, 2015, p. 10.

94 In its 2016 Annual Report, for example, the organization explained that due to the public condemnation of antisemitic positions, hardly any of the rallies it monitored contained open incitement against Jews. “Rather, codes and ciphers were used ... to make antisemitism appear as a legitimate critique of the state’s actions.” p. 16.

95 In an [article](#) co-authored by Benjamin Steinitz on the treatment of antisemitism in the judicial system, the main problem the authors identified was the attachment of the courts to “traditional” antisemitism. The decisive reference to the Nazi period, the authors argued, “historicizes and narrows [the concept of] antisemitism, which serves to protect those who use antisemitic codes.” Liebscher, Pietrzyk, Lagodinsky and Steinitz, “Antisemitismus im Spiegel des Rechts,” *Neue Juristische Online-Zeitschrift* (897), 2020.

In May 2021, for example, as the German media was preoccupied with anti-Israel demonstrations amid widespread civil unrest in Israel-Palestine, the public broadcaster Deutsche Welle asked RIAS's research associate Daniel Poensgen to evaluate statements from these protests. In an article, entitled "[Anti-Israeli demonstrations: Which statements are antisemitic?](#)" Poensgen declared the sign that read, "My voice against settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing," to be antisemitic because it: "describe[d] Israel as a colonial or racist entity." He continued, "as this description does not do justice to the historical facts, it mainly serves to delegitimize Israel as a nation state and thus to deny all Jews the right to [national] self-determination."<sup>96</sup>

Poensgen makes a significant interpretive leap here, dismissing the protesters' argument in three swift steps: firstly, declaring that it is factually wrong; secondly, intimating that the protesters' aim is therefore malevolent; and finally, concluding that therefore they are antisemitic. By promoting the approach that antisemitism nowadays is mainly coded and needs interpretation, and by presenting its own staff as the experts who should interpret it, RIAS emerges as an authority in identifying antisemitism. Moreover, in occluding context and selectively presenting facts, RIAS's self-appointed experts simplify the terms of various cases of alleged antisemitism to advance their arguments. In turn, they are able to communicate an ostensibly watertight narrative on antisemitism in which their bias remains obscured and thus unquestionable.

<sup>96</sup> This is a good example of RIAS's own changes to the IHRA definition. The original example in the IHRA document states: "Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor." RIAS, in translating and "adapting it to the German context," changed the text to "racist / colonial endeavor."



## 5 Delegitimized narratives

RIAS's biased documentation practices heavily stigmatize the Palestinian narrative and its advocates. This process is exacerbated by the organization's unquestioned authority and broad influence. This chapter discusses how politicized accusations of antisemitism delegitimize this narrative and argues that, from RIAS's point of view, almost any political activity by Palestinians related to the conflict in the Middle East can be labeled antisemitic. The chapter further shows how RIAS's work renders Palestinian identity in and of itself suspect. The outcome can be even more severe when directed against individuals: the last part of the chapter presents the case of a dossier against a Germany-Palestinian academic that RIAS secretly assembled and circulated with the clear intention of limiting her professionally.

### Stigmatized communities

A key aim of politicized accusations of antisemitism is the delegitimization of political opponents. In Germany, accusations of antisemitism are among the most serious charges one can level at a person, and to be the subject of such allegations can damage even the most prestigious career. Specifically, they often lead to media firestorms and to the exclusion of the accused party from polite establishment circles.<sup>97</sup>

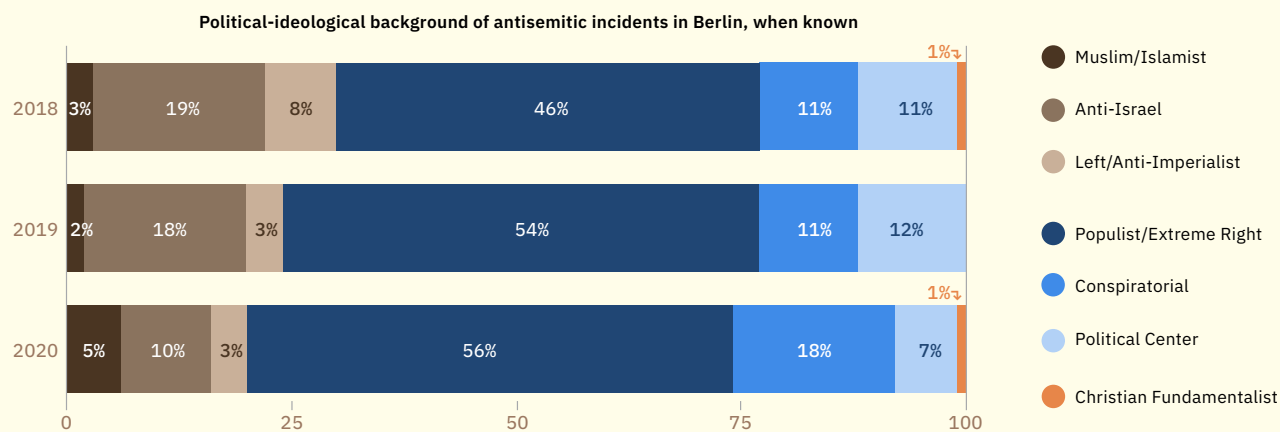
It is therefore doubly grave when such accusations are leveled in bad faith for political ends. In the short term, this approach suppresses a healthy discussion of pressing issues and can have detrimental impacts on people's personal and professional lives; in the long term, it blunts the impact of the accusation itself.

"The worst consequence of RIAS's methods is the stigmatizing of migrant communities," said a scholar who has worked on projects closely involving RIAS and who was interviewed for this report yet requested to remain anonymous. "It is the dehumanization of Palestinians."

It is hard to determine what percentage of the incidents documented by RIAS are related to Muslims and Palestinians. Of the incidents the organization classified according to the offender's political background only 2–5 percent were categorized "Islam/Islamism;" but Palestinians are probably overrepresented in the categories "Anti-Israel Activism" and "Left/Anti-Imperialism," which together account for 13–27 percent of incidents over the past few years (see chart).<sup>98</sup>

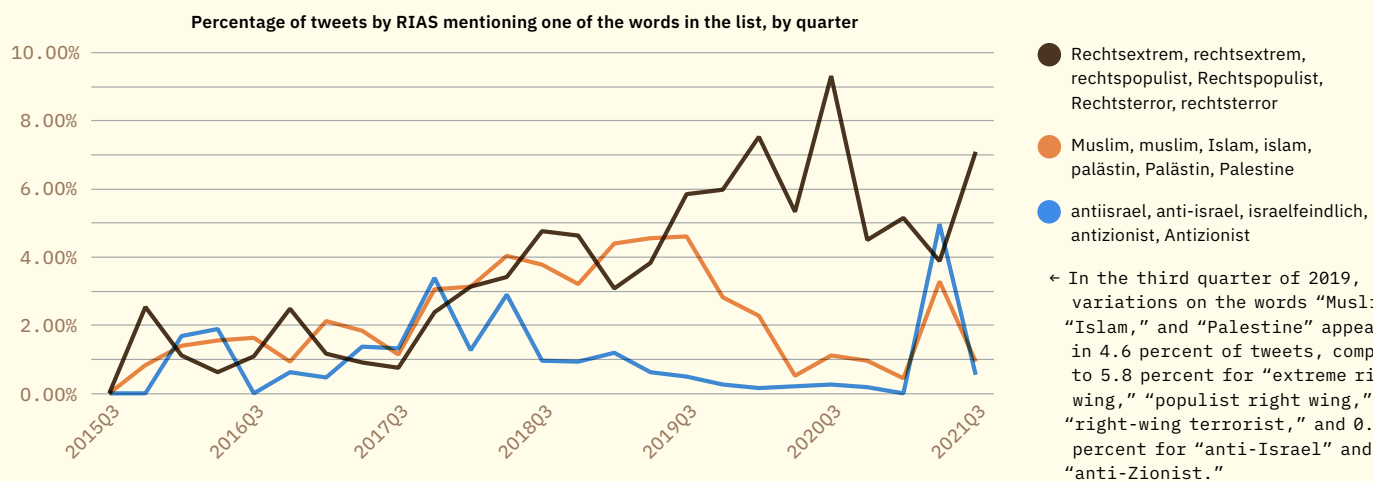
97 Prominent examples include the canceled invitation of the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe from the Ruhrtriennale festival in 2020 and the resignation of the former director of the Jewish Museum, Peter Schäfer. An excellent reconstruction of the events that led to Schäfer's resignation appears in Daniel Bax, *Nicht "jüdisch genug." Chronik einer Kampagne*. Daniel Bax. In: Benz, Wolfgang (Ed.): *Streitfall Antisemitismus: 2020*.

98 *RIAS Berlin 2020*. RIAS does not publish the full breakdown of political-ideological categories in the federal reports, but the few numbers it does mention suggest that these categories represent an even smaller portion of the incidents. We know, for example, that the "Extreme/Populist Right" and "Conspiratorial" categories together make up more than 80 percent of the classifiable incidents in 2020 in Germany. See *federal report 2020*, p. 23.



Despite their limited involvement in alleged antisemitic incidents, Muslims and Palestinians seem to receive a lot of attention from RIAS—as can be seen when the numbers above are compared with tweets, which use similar categories, on the Federal Association’s Twitter account. The following chart illustrates the percentage of tweets related to three categories of background or motivation: Muslims and Palestinians; the extreme and populist right; and anti-Israel and anti-Zionism.

↩ In 2018, 3 percent of the classifiable incidents were attributed to a Muslim/Islamist background. About half of the incidents could not be attributed to a specific ideological background and therefore do not appear in this chart (100 percent reflects the total number of incidents categorized with a “political background”).



Between 2015 and 2019, RIAS’s Twitter seemed to be as preoccupied with Islam and Palestine as it was with the extreme and populist right. In 2018, for example, 20 percent of reported incidents were categorized “Muslim/Islamist” or “Anti-Israel,” and 46 percent were categorized “Populist/Extreme Right” (see chart on political background above). In its communications, however, RIAS mentioned “Muslim/Islamist” and “Anti-Israel” in 5 percent of its tweets and “Populist/Extreme Right” in 4 percent. In short, while right-wing antisemitism is far more important according to its own data, RIAS pays disproportionate attention to Muslim and Israel-related antisemitism in its communications.

Reading through the antisemitic incidents related to Palestinians, moreover, paints a troubling picture: per RIAS’s criteria, it is hard to imagine any political activity by Palestinians related to the conflict in the Middle East that would not be classified as antisemitic.

RIAS automatically tags any critical statement about Israel that includes the words “colonialism,” “apartheid,” or “ethnic cleansing” as antisemitic because,



“they are not only false and impute serious crimes to Israel that it is not committing, they ... also ... demonize Israel and brand it as illegitimate.”<sup>99</sup> Any event or demonstration in which such statements appear on a sign, in a speech, or on a t-shirt is classified as antisemitic as a result.<sup>100</sup> This means that for RIAS—and, by extension, the government departments and media outlets that rely on the organization’s findings—the dozens, hundreds, or sometimes thousands of attendees at these demonstrations are implicated in antisemitic acts. Specifically for migrants, implication in antisemitic incidents might have dire consequences, as the German government is currently debating whether to deny naturalization to people who participated in “antisemitic demonstrations.”

Furthermore, the organizations that call for these demonstrations might also end up on lists like the one published in RIAS’s 80-page monitoring report, “Mobilizations of Israel-Related Antisemitism in the Federal Territory 2021.”

For example, Palästina Spricht (“Palestine Speaks”), a self-described left-wing group whose goals are to give a voice to Palestinians in Germany and to act against “the illegal occupation and apartheid,” ended up on that list.<sup>101</sup> RIAS notes that Palästina Spricht “called for numerous demonstrations and rallies nationwide in May 2021, at some of which antisemitic incidents were documented.”<sup>102</sup> Three of these incidents are described in RIAS’s database at length: two people wore t-shirts with the slogan “Free Palestine” under a map in Palestinian national colors that included present-day Israel; another held a sign reading “Stop Genocide & Child Murder;” and some people chanted “1, 2, 3, 4, occupation no more; 5, 6, 7, 8, Israel is an apartheid state.” In one of the demonstrations, the crowd applauded a speaker who said, “Don’t give one millimeter to antisemitism!” But RIAS said the same speaker “also perpetuated the antisemitic motifs that Israel is an apartheid state and engages in ethnic cleansing.”<sup>103</sup>

Thus Palästina Spricht was labeled antisemitic, and so were the individuals who work with it. Such a broad accusation also potentially implicates anyone who might support the organization, provide it with services, lease spaces to it for its events, handle its accounting, or even design its website.

RIAS’s definition of Israel-related antisemitism extends beyond direct criticisms of the state itself. The organization considers some symbols and narratives inherent to Palestinian identity, history, and activism to be antisemitic too—for example, “references to the BDS campaign and the ‘right of return’ for so-called Palestinian refugees.”<sup>104</sup> RIAS considers these references antisemitic because:

The realization of the so-called right of return of the Palestinian refugees ... is practically impossible without abolishing Israel as a Jewish state ... However, against the backdrop of the historical persecution of Jews and the persistence of antisemitism worldwide, especially vis-à-vis Israel’s Arab neighbors, it is necessary that a Jewish sovereign exists—because Jews could never rely on the protection of non-Jewish state authorities, or were persecuted by them.<sup>105</sup>

Any mention of the “so-called” right of return for “so-called” Palestinian refugees therefore seems to be antisemitic as well. Other Palestinian national symbols also

99 RIAS-Bayern Annual Report 2021, p. 29.

100 “RIAS Berlin also proactively records gatherings with antisemitic and anti-Israel orientation. This includes on-site observations, background analyses and resulting evaluations. This monitoring concerns numerous gatherings every year. If antisemitic content is identified in speeches, slogans, on carried banners or in calls, the entire gathering is registered as an antisemitic incident of the type offending behavior.” See RIAS Berlin Annual Report 2021, p. 11.

101 Palestine Speaks, “About us.”

102 Mobilisierungen, p. 35.

103 RIAS Chronicle, May 20, 2021, June 9, 2021, July 23, 2021.

104 RIAS Bayern Annual Report 2021, p. 32.

105 From the river, p. 44.

fall foul of this designation: as we have previously seen, if Palestinians draw the map of Israel-Palestine the way Israelis do and label it according to their own history and nationhood, it is labeled by RIAS as antisemitic. The same goes for a protest poster featuring historical maps showing the shrinking of Palestinian-held territories. For RIAS, such a depiction intentionally distorts reality and creates the impression that “Israel continues to expand,” therefore Israel is to blame, which means it is illegitimate and a colonial state (a framing which amounts to antisemitism).<sup>106</sup>

<sup>106</sup> [From the river](#), p. 55.

The cartoon character Handala, [known as](#) “an iconic symbol in the Palestinian collective identity,” is considered antisemitic. Its mere appearance at a demonstration — on protesters’ t-shirts, for example — is cause for RIAS to label the whole event antisemitic.<sup>107</sup> The same goes for the mere image of a key, which might refer to the right of return.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>107</sup> [RIAS Chronicle](#), May 22, 2021, July 10, 2020.

<sup>108</sup> [RIAS Chronicle](#), May 22, 2021.



← Graffiti of a Palestinian Flag in Hermannplatz, Berlin. Oren Ziv 2022.

RIAS deems other types of protest illegitimate, too. The slogan, “We can’t breathe since 1948,” is antisemitic because it implies that “the entire existence of Israel since its founding is equated with murder ... and delegitimized as racist.”<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> [RIAS Chronicle](#), May 11, 2021.

Any mention of BDS at a protest, especially a declaration of support thereof, is classified as antisemitism.<sup>110</sup> A private Twitter conversation in which a user expressed the argument that the Germans have a special responsibility to remedy “what the Zionist movement and later the Israeli state did to the Palestinians” also counts as an antisemitic incident.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>110</sup> [From the river](#), p. 45.

<sup>111</sup> [RIAS Chronicle](#), June 21, 2019.

In fact, RIAS Bavaria labeled every protest relating to Israel-Palestine that it monitored in spring 2021, during a period of significant unrest on both sides of the Green Line, as antisemitic.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup> [From the river](#), p. 5.

Beyond all these forms of protest and expressions of Palestinian national identity, RIAS also attempts to elucidate general terms that — although “not necessarily antisemitic in themselves” — are often used in antisemitic statements or “acquire antisemitic meaning” in certain contexts. One such example the organization cites is Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, which RIAS

describes as “a point of reference for many, especially Muslim, Palestinians in general, but also for terrorists.”<sup>113</sup>

113 *From the river*, p. 40.

Labeling all things Palestinian as antisemitic has a clear and direct impact on the perception of Palestinians in German society. This dynamic could be seen at work in an episode from 2019, in which a German man on a train overheard the word ‘Palestine’ in a conversation at the table next to him. The man, apparently alarmed, *tweeted*: “[W]hen people at the next table on the train start bringing up “palestine” as a topic for no reason at all, it’s either time to get off, put on headphones, or yell at them. #antisemitism.”

That man was Prof. Samuel Salzborn, who, shortly after, was appointed commissioner for antisemitism for the state of Berlin. He maintains a close relationship with RIAS.

### A secret dossier

On the evening of Nov. 1, 2019, Dr. Anna-Esther Younes, a scholar of critical race theory, got a phone call. She was preparing for a *small conference* the following morning hosted by the German party Die Linke (“The Left”), entitled “Strategies against the Right — Countering Racism on the Street, in the Workplace and in Parliament,” at which she had been invited to speak some weeks earlier.

When she picked up the phone, a representative of the organizers was on the line. “He told me that he’s sorry, but I cannot be on the panel. There were some complications that have to do with my ‘Palestine stuff,’” Younes recalls.<sup>114</sup> “It was all very opaque. I was sad that I couldn’t present my report on Islamophobia. [But] I didn’t even think about it any further because it happens so regularly.”

114 Phone interview with the author, May, 2022.

As Younes suggests, this was not the first time she had been disinvited from an event shortly before it took place. But this time, an unusual chain of events revealed how the intervention had come about — and when the curtain was raised, RIAS was center-stage.

A few dozen participants came to the conference on “Strategies against the Right,” as planned. Katina Schubert, leader of the Berlin branch of Die Linke, explained that Younes was uninvited because of her “affiliation to BDS.” She reminded the audience of the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses in 1933 and of the brutal attack on the synagogue in Halle the previous month by a right-wing extremist, and she concluded: “For us, antisemitism is one of the worst threats we have here ... and that is why we must not allow any inaccuracies, none whatsoever. That is why ... BDS cannot be an alliance partner.”<sup>115</sup>

115 A video of the event was viewed by the author.

A couple of weeks later, Younes received a file (she declined to share the source). The header read: “This paper is for your information and may not be published. If you wish to quote passages from it and/or use it in publication, please contact the Research and Information Center on Antisemitism Berlin [RIAS] or the Mobile Counseling Service against Right-Wing Extremism Berlin [MBR].”<sup>116</sup>

116 MBR is the sister organization of RIAS in Berlin, and it is hosted by VDK as well. Steinitz worked for MBR before the project separated.

Reading through the dossier, Younes was surprised to find a short description of herself and a list of personal and professional issues ascribed to her that sought to justify her disinvitation from the conference. It had been sent to Schubert, the leader of Die Linke, on Nov. 1, the day before the conference.

By then, Schubert had already received a phone call from her old friend Bianca Klose, the head of RIAS's sister organization MBR. Klose apparently presented the case on the phone; the dossier immediately followed. Schubert read the file and decided to cancel Younes's participation on the spot.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>117</sup> This reconstruction of the events was described by Katina Schubert herself at a meeting on Feb. 12, 2019, at her office in Berlin. Anna-Esther Younes was present with her lawyer, Armin Grimm. This description is based on a report from memory that they wrote after the meeting.

In a meeting the following month, Schubert allegedly told Younes and her lawyer, Armin Grimm, that it is normal for organizations like RIAS and MBR to send such dossiers around. This is what they are paid for, she said — to point things out to others.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

Although the file refers directly to the conference planned for the next day, it does not contain any explicit recommendations and maintains a matter-of-fact style. Nevertheless, its three pages on Younes leave no doubt about its intended purpose.

It introduces Younes as “a daughter of a Palestinian” and states that “the U.S. philosopher Judith Butler supports her,” two details pulled from an [old news article](#). (In fact, Prof. Butler sat on Younes's PhD committee.) The file then notes that, in 2010, Younes “published a text about the Hamas women's movement.” It also notes that “she legitimizes Hamas and the sexism within this organization.”

The sentence is followed by a paragraph in English (the document itself is in German), an excerpt from the abstract of Younes's academic [article](#), “A gendered movement for liberation: Hamas's women's movement and nation-building in contemporary Palestine,” published in the peer-reviewed University of California Press journal, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*.

The dossier also cites a [Palestinian solidarity petition](#) Younes signed in 2014, a petition which many Israelis and members of Die Linke also signed. That same year, Younes posted a photo on Facebook of a graffiti that read, “Boycott Apartheid Israel” — the most substantial evidence of her support for BDS that RIAS found.

All this raises tough questions about the methods and practices of an organization whose main purpose is the documentation of antisemitic incidents. “There seems to be friendly contact with [Rasmea Odeh's] lawyer,” the dossier says, referring to a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who was convicted in 1970 of involvement in two terrorist bombings in Jerusalem. How does RIAS monitor friendly contacts, and how does it choose the subjects of such monitoring?

Younes contacted the European Legal Support Center (ELSC), an organization that provides legal advice to groups and individuals advocating for Palestinian rights, and, together with her lawyer Grimm, they filed an access-to-data request based on the EU General Data Protection Regulation.

After RIAS rejected the request, Younes appealed to the Data Protection Authority, which dragged the case out for almost two years. It was finally resolved in June 2022, after Younes and the team decided to go public — first with a [letter of support](#) signed by 500 scholars, artists, activists, and organizations, and then through the [press](#). RIAS sent Younes the file, admitting its authorship.

The Data Protection Authority ruled that RIAS cannot claim journalistic or academic exemptions from data protection regulations and will have to share all the data it had collected on Younes. Others have requested access to the information the organization holds on them. When this report was written, another person discovered that the organization has a dossier on them. That person, too, has a Palestinian background.



## 6 Reinforced narratives

Just as RIAS uses allegations of Israel-related antisemitism to delegitimize Palestinian identity and narratives, so too do they leverage such charges to help promote a right-wing and pro-settler narrative on Israel-Palestine. This chapter discusses how RIAS advances this narrative in its publications and through its interventions in political debates. It argues that RIAS holds clear political positions on the conflict in the Middle East, and it looks at the organization's wide range of misleading "explanations" about the conflict's origins, developments, and current dynamics, all of which advance arguments conspicuously similar to those of Israeli right-wing, pro-settler propaganda.

### Reinforcing political narratives

RIAS appears to hold highly specific positions on a variety of questions regarding Israel-Palestine. These positions — which often have nothing to do with antisemitism — are communicated through its case descriptions and various publications. It is not entirely clear who RIAS represents by promoting these attitudes, or why they are part of its work.

A special publication by RIAS Bavaria, "[From the river to the sea: Israel-related antisemitism in Bavaria in 2021](#)," is a case in point. The 80-page booklet presents several chapters aimed at the novice on the history and politics of the Middle East, and it covers the demonstrations held in Bavaria against the Gaza escalation in May and June of that year (all of which, say the authors, featured "antisemitic content"). It also includes a chapter that guides the reader through the history and theoretical underpinnings of Zionism and the nature of anti-Zionism (which for RIAS, as noted previously, is simply a form of antisemitism). But the majority of the publication is dedicated to a glossary of terms, symbols, and slogans documented by RIAS. The glossary is intended to define Israel-related antisemitism.

The premise of the entire text is that criticizing Israel means attacking Jews' protection against antisemitism, and that therefore such criticism is antisemitic. The following argument recurs often in the report:

If Israel is criticized, this protection from antisemitism is always under criticism too — regardless of whether the statements are specifically antisemitic or not. If the end of Israel as a Jewish state is called for, the

consequence is that Jews should be handed over to antisemitism without protection. Those who advocate this accept the death of Jews.

The historical sections of the booklet present a rudimentary narrative of the history of the conflict from a Zionist point of view. It begins with the early Jewish settlers in the late 19th century and continues with the 1948 “War of Independence,” the 1967 Six-Day War, and the 1990s Oslo Accords and their collapse, for which the primary blame is placed on the Palestinians — another recurring theme in the booklet.

The simplistic and heavily revisionist history presented in the report is presumably directed at readers with no prior knowledge of the region. The most far-fetched analyses in the publication, however, concern the situation in the West Bank. For example, in the “Apartheid” chapter, RIAS describes the ethnically-divided dual legal system in the occupied territories as follows:

The Palestinian residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip do not have Israeli citizenship for complex historical reasons. In the parts of the West Bank in particular that are Israeli-controlled, they are subject to a different law than Israelis. Refusal by the Palestinian side to accept offers for a state of Palestine is one reason why large parts of the West Bank are still under Israeli control. Here, too, one can in no way speak of apartheid: it belongs to the essence of every nation-state that people without the corresponding citizenship have different rights than the citizens of the country.

The Palestinians are to blame not only for the occupation but also for the settlements:

The fact that there are in some cases large Israeli settlements in the West Bank today is not a result of a “colonial” policy of the State of Israel, but arose in particular from Israeli internal and security conditions as well as from the dominant Palestinian and formerly Jordanian position of the past 50 years, which prevented a real “land for peace” solution.

Other thorny issues are similarly brushed off. The military checkpoints “lead to unequal treatment,” but, considering the nature of border controls in general, “it is hardly surprising.” And as for Sheikh Jarrah, the neighborhood in occupied East Jerusalem where right-wing settler groups have long sought to forcibly displace Palestinians from their homes, RIAS notes that although the situation is “complex,” some Palestinian residents still live in the houses that belong to settler organizations “and have so far never paid rent.”

There is ample scholarly and journalistic work that counters the many historical arguments RIAS offers in its report.<sup>120</sup> Such work does not require discussion here. Suffice it to say that not only are these narratives aligned with right-wing, pro-settler talking points on Israel-Palestine, but also that promoting them should have no place in the work of an organization responsible for documenting antisemitism in Germany.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example: Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *Lords of the Land: The War for Israel’s Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967–2007*, 2009; Michael Sfard, *The Wall and the Gate: Israel, Palestine, and the Legal Battle for Human Rights*, 2018; Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, 2006. Concerning the situation in Sheikh Jarrah, see the legal memo, [\*The Absentee Property Law and its Application to East Jerusalem\*](#) by the Norwegian Refugee Council.

### A guide to all wars

RIAS's publication also presents political arguments relating to current affairs, policymaking, and diplomacy. These, too, strongly resemble the official position of the Israeli government, and at times they clearly go against the position of the German government. The following is a small selection from the RIAS publication:

- / The original Iran deal (JCPOA) from 2015 “contributes more to making the bomb possible for the Iranian regime than to preventing it.”
- / The number of resolutions that condemn Israel at the UN General Assembly in recent years “can only be explained as an anti-Jewish obsession.”
- / The refusal to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital is an expression of “Antizionism and anti-Israel policy.”
- / The exaggerated attention that the conflict receives owes more to “anti-Israel and antisemitic resentment” than any concern for Palestinian rights.
- / The right of return is dangerous for Israel and it is “in no way guaranteed under international law” or any UN resolution.

The publication clearly aims to equip the lay reader with explanations for all past and future military escalations, while criticizing their coverage in the local media and attacking any diplomatic response that is not fully supportive of the Israeli government.

As RIAS claims, Israel's enemies regularly instigate escalations, and Israel is forced to react to massive rocket attacks on its civilian population. If children in Gaza die, the publication continues, it is because Hamas uses them as human shields. If the Israeli security forces enter the Al-Aqsa Mosque, it is allegedly also the Palestinians' fault because they ran into the building to escape clashes and drew the troops in after them.

Moreover, as RIAS asserts, the media has a harmful “both-sides” approach to reporting on the conflict. This approach unfairly and inaccurately maligns Israel's actions. As RIAS seems to suggest, balanced reporting is ultimately anti-Israeli, and asking “both sides” to end their attacks is anti-Zionist (which, per the organization's analysis, is antisemitic). To prove its point, the organization cites an Instagram story from the German public news service Tagesschau reporting that “Israel and Gaza are shooting at each other.” Although this “may be technically correct,” RIAS says, the wording:

conceals something fundamental, namely the motivations and goals of the bombardment: while from the Gaza Strip Islamist terrorist organizations fire rockets at Israeli civilian infrastructure — residential areas, kindergartens, hospitals — Israel targets specifically the terrorist infrastructure in Gaza, from which these attacks come.



## Political intervention

RIAS does not shy away from accusing Israelis themselves of antisemitism either. It has done so on numerous occasions on which Israeli activists protested against the policies of their state.

The protests against an Israeli event in Berlin are a case in point. On Sept. 7, 2019, as RIAS documents in their [report](#), “Antisemitic disturbance at ‘Seret Film Festival,’” a few Israeli activists disrupted the Q&A session after one of the festival screenings. Their protest mainly involved a series of interruptions: activists took turns standing up and facing the audience, called Israel an apartheid state, held up a banner, threw pamphlets in the air, or read out the names of Palestinian victims of Israeli violence.<sup>121</sup>

As usual, RIAS deemed the mention of “apartheid,” as well as the participation of activists affiliated with the BDS campaign, antisemitic. But the context here is unique: the event was sponsored by the Israeli government, the protesters were Israeli, the panel participants and organizers were Israeli, and from the documentation of the event it appears a significant part of the audience was Israeli too. When the action heated up — becoming an exchange of yells between the organizers, the activists, and the audience — everyone began speaking in Hebrew.

As they explained during the action, the activists understood the festival as a propaganda tool used by the Israeli government to whitewash and normalize the occupation and its repressive policies. They were not the only ones who saw the festival as part of the political struggle over Israel’s reputation: Seret received funds not only from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs but also from the Ministry of Strategic Affairs (MSA), a government operation dedicated to exactly this goal.<sup>122</sup>

120 Documentation of the action is available on the [BDS Germany website](#).

121 In 2020, public support for Seret from the Ministry of Strategic Affairs totaled 47,193 NIS (about 13,000 Euro). See: [Public Knowledge Workshop](#). The ministry was shut down in 2021 and revived at the end of 2022.



← A vigil against the Seret Film Festival in Berlin, 2016. The Hebrew signs read “Festivals in Berlin, Massacre in Gaza”. Anne Paq

For years the MSA has, as per a [deep investigation](#) by the Israeli media watchdog [HaAyin HaShevi’it](#) (“The Seventh Eye”), “been spearheading an international campaign to counter what it sees as ‘delegitimization’ of the State of Israel.” According to The Seventh Eye, “this project has, in large part, involved

providing funds and handing down directives to non-governmental organizations and journalists in order to enlist them in the fight against BDS.”

The MSA is also responsible, the investigation continues, for “having created a ‘network’ of domestic and international organizations to implement its policies,” believing that its messaging will be more effective when coming from “individuals and institutions who are perceived as unconnected to the state [of Israel],” rather than via “official government propaganda.” Other [news](#) outlets have uncovered further evidence of the ministry’s attempts to “operate” NGOs and secretly advance pro-Israel’s advocacy through non-state actors, even newspapers, such as the [Jerusalem Post](#).

Despite the Seret Film Festival’s clear political agenda, as evinced by its sources of funding, RIAS obscured the political motivations behind the event by leveraging claims of antisemitism against the protesters and reframing their confrontation as illegitimate.

RIAS has taken part in events held in support of Israel too. In 2018, founder Benjamin Steinitz moderated a panel on “Combating BDS in all aspects on campus & in all aspects of life” at the [Israel Congress](#). The Israel Congress, the biggest meeting of self-prescribed “pro-Israel” organizations in Germany, is organized by the Frankfurt-based organization “I Like Israel e.V.,” which was also funded by the MSA.<sup>123</sup> RIAS sponsored the Congress together with a long list of Jewish and non-Jewish organizations, many of which have a clear mandate to lobby on behalf of Israeli government causes.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>122</sup> In 2020, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs paid 169,095 NIS (47,200 Euro) to the organization. [Public Knowledge Workshop](#).

One of the main guests on the [panel](#) was Tzachi Gavrieli (introduced by Steinitz as “our colleague Tzachi”), then-deputy director general of the MSA. Gavrieli gave a short presentation about the Israeli “National Task Force for Countering Delegitimization,” in which he discussed “the enemy’s” deceptive appearances and clandestine, spiderweb-like links.

<sup>123</sup> Full list: [Israel Kongress website](#).

[One of the slides](#) presented a split screen: on one side was a picture of Lauryn Hill, titled “Cultural Battlefield: Ms. Lauryn Hill cancels concert in Israel;” on the other was the image of a scorched bus taken after a deadly suicide bombing during the early 2000s, titled “Physical Battlefield.” [Another slide](#) presented an illustration of “[The Hate Net](#),” in which the Jewish-German organization Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East was shown entangled in a thick network of links that eventually led to Hamas.

The MSA’s preoccupation with Israel-related antisemitism is not surprising. Many meetings in the calendars of the ministry’s top officials are typically dedicated to sessions like “going over the antisemitism report,” “antisemitism presentation,” and even “summary meeting on antisemitism report campaign, digital and PR.” In early 2019, the ministry’s officials also met the German politician Uwe Becker, shortly before he was appointed the antisemitism commissioner of the state of Hesse.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>124</sup> The agenda was released in response to a FOIA request.

In cases such as the Israel Congress panel, RIAS seems at ease with overt Israeli state propaganda. In cases such as the Seret Film Festival, on the other hand, it seems determined to claim that protests against the proliferation of Israeli state propaganda are antisemitic, even when the accused are Israelis

protesting their own government. Such interventions are subtle but telling. And for those interested in “politically independent documentation and analysis of antisemitic incidents”—which RIAS claims to provide—they should be deeply disconcerting.

## Coda

In the last decade, against the backdrop of a significant influx of refugees and the growing right-wing backlash against them, the German public debate concerning antisemitism has shifted dramatically. Although [police statistics](#) dating back to 2011 consistently name the extreme right as the main source of antisemitic crime, discussions regarding the resurgence of antisemitism have increasingly focused on criticism of the Israeli state and its occupation policies, criticism which is said to cross the line into expressions of animosity toward Jews.

In this context, the immediate suspects of such alleged expressions of antisemitism — alongside human rights groups, leftists, and international artists and academics who boycott Israel — are Muslims, specifically Arab refugees and migrants. Josef Schuster, the head of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, once described such Muslim Arab migrants and refugees as coming from “intolerant” cultures that possess an integral [“hatred of Jews.”](#)

It is this growing concern over what German politicians sometimes call [“imported antisemitism,”](#) specifically of the kind exhibited during migrant-lead demonstrations against Israel’s military operations, that provided the impetus for RIAS’s establishment in 2014. RIAS also took an active role in shaping the discussions around combating “any kind of antisemitism”<sup>126</sup> — especially the “Israel-related” kind — by informing decision-makers and influencing the institutionalization of the fight against antisemitism at all levels of government. In the last five years, at least 59 “antisemitism commissioners” have been instated at the federal, state, and communal levels, as well as in local police forces and state prosecutor offices.<sup>127</sup> Many of them regularly rely on the assessments and information provided by RIAS for their work.

Yet as this report has shown, RIAS’s operating principles and methodology, as well as its presentation of statistics, case studies, and opinions, are in urgent need of open, evidence-based, and scholarly critique. The risk that the organization’s work, as it currently stands, can be used to silence legitimate political speech and threaten fundamental civil rights grows more visible by the day. A case in point: Nakba Day in Berlin. Following a few [documented cases](#) of anti-Jewish statements professed by individual participants in pro-Palestinian events, the Berlin police have, for the past two years, banned almost all demonstrations surrounding the commemoration of the Nakba on May 15. Human Rights Watch [condemned](#) the decision as an “extreme restriction that effectively works as a collective punishment.”

<sup>125</sup> Josef Schuster’s preface to [RIAS Bayern Annual Report 2021](#)

<sup>126</sup> The current count as of May 2023: along with the federal commissioner Klein, there are 15 commissioners at the state level and at least eight at the communal level (in Bamberg, Münster and several districts of Berlin). The Berlin and Bavaria police each have a commissioner while Sachsen-Anhalt and Baden-Württemberg have “police rabbis” who educate on antisemitism. The public prosecution offices in Bavaria and Baden Württemberg each have two commissioners, while Berlin, Thuringia, and Hesse each have one. Nord-Rhein-Westphalia have 22 commissioners in the prosecution office. There is also one commissioner in the Ministry of Culture. Some of these commissioners hold the antisemitism commissioner title along with other responsibilities, some have their own offices with several assistants. A recent article in [Jewish Currents](#) documents and interviews some of these commissioners.

At the beginning of May 2023, in response to a [parliamentary question](#) on the matter, the Berlin government pointed to RIAS data, which showed “an accumulation of antisemitic incidents during conflictual political events in Israel.” The government explained how the local chapter’s statistics also showed, “how the development and spread of Israel-related antisemitism in Berlin has remained at a high level for years.”

This assessment, made by Berlin’s antisemitism commissioner Samuel Salzborn, references an analysis conducted by RIAS that specified how “certain historical anniversaries ... establish the opportunity structure” for antisemitism. In an [interview](#), Salzborn justified the legal bans on demonstrations; he claimed that Palestinian voices are not suppressed in Germany, while arguing that it is only antisemitism that is barred. “If such rallies were not anti-Israeli and antisemitic, but truly pro-Palestinian, then the situation would be different,” Salzborn said. “But that would also mean, for example, demonstrating against the terror of Hamas or its totalitarian policies. That would benefit the Palestinians much more than joining in false accusations [against Israel].”

The day before that interview, RIAS Berlin published its [annual report](#). In their [press release](#), titled “No decrease in antisemitic violence in Berlin 2022,” RIAS claimed to have documented 848 antisemitic incidents in Berlin in the past year. The fact that the organization registered a 20 percent overall decrease in antisemitic incidents was not cause for celebration, as they still recorded 22 violent incidents in 2022 (compared to the 24 they recorded in 2021). Six of the eight cases of violence presented in the report had already been covered in the media at the time they occurred, and RIAS added no further information about them.<sup>128</sup>

An [article](#) on the report, headlined “Antisemitism: How dangerous it is to be out and about in Berlin wearing a kippah,” which was published in one of Berlin’s leading newspapers, emphasized that each day, “at least two antisemitic incidents are registered in Berlin.” One had to read much further to discover that 57 percent of the recorded cases actually happened online, and that the majority of them (84 percent) were not directed at individuals but instead were comments addressed to organizations (Jewish and non-Jewish) as well as “Israeli institutions.”<sup>129</sup>

In the report itself, RIAS claimed to have registered far fewer “Israel-related” antisemitic incidents during the month of May than in that of the previous year (155 in 2021 to 42 in 2022). Their explanation: unlike in May 2021, when an outbreak of violence between Israeli forces and Palestinians contributed to political mobilizations in Germany, in 2022, RIAS “found no such opportunity structure for antisemitic incidents.”

This is an interesting take, given the increased violence against Palestinians in the occupied territories at the time — most prominently, the killing of the Palestinian-American Al-Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh on May 11, 2022.<sup>130</sup> That the decrease in incidents in Berlin might also have had something to do with the banning of various pro-Palestinian protests that month — protests which RIAS would likely have deemed antisemitic — was not offered as a possible explanation.

127 See reports in various newspapers from [March 9, 2022](#), [March 10, 2022](#), [Sep. 14, 2022](#), [Sep. 15, 2022](#), [Nov. 9, 2022](#), [Nov. 17, 2022](#).

128 From the 2022 annual report: “RIAS Berlin recorded hostility against institutions in 468 incidents in 2022. In almost 90% of these incidents, Jewish or Israeli institutions were affected.”

129 The Berlin Police claimed, in its 15-page ban on Palestinian demonstrations—which was written in May 2022, even before the killing of Abu Akleh—that “the current situation in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is comparable to last year’s and again emotionalizes anti-constitutional actors.” Verbotbescheid der Berliner Polizei from May 12, 2022. Viewed by the author.

Notwithstanding the decrease in incidents related to the situation in Palestine, RIAS has discovered another arena of antisemitism to include in its reports: remarks concerning the Russian attack on Ukraine and Israeli reactions to it, specifically Israel's hesitance to join the international sanctions against Russia. One expression of such alleged antisemitism, which RIAS considered important enough to include in their press release, was the following comment sent on Nov. 4 to an "Israeli establishment" in Berlin: "I am outraged that you refuse to help the Ukrainians. You and your people must know what it means to be subjected helplessly to unjust violence. Your behavior is antisocial." According to RIAS, this statement, "in which Jews or Israel were expected to behave in a certain way as a consequence of the Shoah," is antisemitic, even if it was addressed to an "Israeli establishment."

As per its established methods, RIAS left out any contextual information that might have undermined the classification of such a comment as antisemitic. For example, one might think of very similar comments Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy — himself Jewish — [made](#) last year in a video message to the Israeli parliament, comparing the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the Holocaust and citing the Jewish people's moral responsibility to militarily support his state. Ending his speech, Zelenskyy challenged Israel's policies in no uncertain terms: "One can keep asking why we can't get weapons from you. Or why Israel has not imposed strong sanctions against Russia. Why it doesn't put pressure on Russian business. But it is up to you, dear brothers and sisters, to choose the answer. And you will have to live with this answer, people of Israel."

One is left to wonder whether Zelenskyy's words, had they been uttered to the Israeli ambassador in Berlin, would have made their way into RIAS's annual report as well.



## Appendix

The following table presents the state of grants and funding of eight local RIAS organizations and the federal association as of May 2022, in thousands of euros:

Organization	Funding Source	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Federal Association	Federal Ministry for Family Affairs <sup>a</sup>			130	161 <sup>b</sup>		358	472	450 <sup>c</sup>
	Antisemitism Commissioner of the Federal Government					210	38	42	121
	Central Council of Jews in Germany					19	15	15	15
	Amadeu Antonio Foundation*				?	?	?	?	?
	Lotto Foundation Berlin								58 <sup>†</sup>
	Donations*				?	?	?	?	?
RIAS Berlin	Senate Department for Justice <sup>d</sup>	29	58	72	80	83	118	153	120
	Amadeu Antonio Foundation*	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
RIAS Bavaria	State Ministry for Family					381	381	200	200 <sup>e</sup>
RIAS Brandenburg	State Chancellery <sup>f</sup>					2	68	82	
RIAS Thuringia	State Chancellery							120	150 <sup>†</sup>
RIAS Lower Saxony	Ministry of Justice						30	85	115 <sup>g</sup>
	City of Hanover						15	15	15
RIAS Saarland	Ministry for Social Affairs							40	38
RIAS North Rhine-Westphalia								98	168 <sup>h</sup>
RIAS Hesse									220

a Through the federal program “Live Democracy!”

b Funding in 2017-18 was forwarded through the Central Welfare Board of Jews in Germany (ZWST) to RIAS Berlin’s sponsor, the Society for a Democratic Culture in Berlin (VDK e.V.), for the development of the Federal Association RIAS.

c The sum requested for 2022 (not final).

d Through the state program “Democracy. Diversity. Respect.”

e Funding is biannual, totaling 400,000 euro for the period of 2021-22.

f Through the program “Tolerant Brandenburg.” RIAS Brandenburg was active as part of the RIAS network until 2021.

g The state partly uses federal funds from the program “Live Democracy!” to provide funding to RIAS: 50,000 euro in 2021 and 40,000 in 2022.

h For the development of RIAS, 266,000 euro was granted between August 2021 and June 2022.

\* Declined to share information

† The amount was not final at the time of inquiry and represents the amount RIAS requested.