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## In Berlin

Last Friday afternoon, shortly after the Palestinian writer and researcher Salman Abu Sitta had said that ‘the voice of the victim is silenced, denied, condemned and vilified,’ the German police cut the power to the Palästina-Kongress in Berlin.

The three-day conference, whose organisers included the [Jüdische Stimme für gerechten Frieden in Nahost](#) (‘Jewish Voice for Just Peace in the Middle East’), had faced opposition since it was announced in February. There were [predictable headlines](#) from the pro-Israel media conglomerate Axel Springer, but even leftist outlets used similar rhetoric: *taz* called the event a gathering for ‘anti-Israel and terror-glorifying groups’, quoting a source who suggested that the conference had links to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood and was likely to support ‘Islamism and terrorism’; *Jungle World* billed it as a ‘congress of Israel haters’.

The Berlin Senate tried to find ways to cancel the event. The Berliner Sparkasse bank froze Jüdische Stimme’s account, which had been used to collect the donations and ticket sales for the conference, refusing to release the funds until the group provided a list of its members’ full names and addresses. Organisers quickly put together a fundraising event so the conference could continue. They had to relocate at the last minute after the initial venue, a café in Kreuzberg, received a phone call from the police regarding ‘security concerns’ for the event and felt pressured to cancel.

The conference’s event space in Tempelhof reportedly received similar calls. ‘Are these the methods of the mafia or are these the methods of democracy?’ asked Jüdische Stimme’s chair, the composer Wieland Hoban.

On Friday, the Berlin mayor, Kai Wegner, [tweeted](#) that it was ‘intolerable’ that the conference was set to go on as planned. He may have had an inkling, however, that it wouldn’t: an hour earlier, Dr [Ghassan Abu Sitta](#) – who spent 43 days volunteering at

hospitals in Gaza last year – flew into Brandenburg Airport from the UK to give a keynote address at the conference. Instead he was detained, questioned for three and a half hours and ultimately denied entry into Germany. The Greek economist and former finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, another speaker on the programme, was also barred from entering Germany or taking part in any political activity in the country, including by video call. (He has since published [the text of his speech](#).)

There were also delays on the ground at the event space. Organisers had arrived at eight o'clock on Friday morning to begin setting up. Registration was due to take place between eleven and two. Citing vague 'regulations', however, the police had prevented almost everyone from entering the building. At half past one, I was among the hundreds of attendees still waiting for registration to start. An hour later, I was pressed between a volunteer who had been meant to start their shift at eleven but couldn't get across the police line, and a woman who had flown in from Beirut that morning.

Approximately 2500 police were on duty for an event with 800 ticket-holders. The organisers were then told by the authorities that they would only be able to admit 250 ticket-holders: a ratio of ten police officers to every conference goer.

I had a press ticket but was denied entry by the police on the grounds that I was a freelancer and neither a German citizen nor working with a German media outlet. I later learned from several of the organisers that the police had a separate media list, and let 'their' members of the press in through a back door without the organisers' knowledge.

It was a couple of hours later that the video message from Salman Abu Sitta (Ghassan's father) began. Three minutes into the recording, a group of twenty to thirty police in riot gear stormed the stage. A smaller group of officers broke into the electricity room and cut the power. Most of this – until the power cut – is partially visible and clearly audible on the [conference's livestream](#). After the power was cut, the room was plunged into darkness.

'There was no communication, only chaos,' one of the speakers told me afterwards. A police officer later explained that Salman Abu Sitta was banned from speaking in Germany, which was the reason the police cancelled the entire congress and ordered everyone to leave, making several arrests and [removing some people by force](#). An officer outside shrugged as attendees pressed him with questions about the legality of cancelling the conference: 'I'm just following orders.'

'What happened yesterday is not and cannot be an internal German issue,' the Israeli filmmaker Dror Dayan said at a press conference the following day. 'What happened yesterday should go around the world; should shame and blame Germany everywhere.'

On Saturday afternoon, a demonstration against the suppression of the conference began outside Berlin's town hall, the Rotes Rathaus. At least one of the U-bahn entrances along the route, at Unter den Linden, was [blocked off](#), making it difficult for protesters to disperse if things got ugly. Police stormed the march, kettling demonstrators and, according to some social media posts, attempting to arrest children as young as [eight](#) or [eleven](#) years old. The march turned into a sit-in until those who had been detained were released.

The following day, demonstrators gathered on a sliver of Tiergarten across the street from the Bundestag where, for the previous week, the protest camp Occupy Against Occupation had been running. The police presence was high: at one point they banned the use of Arabic, even for prayers. Police vans lined Scheidemannstraße for most of Sunday. In the early evening, following a performance on the lawn by a Gazan musician whose song lyrics included the [legally contested](#) phrase 'from the river to the sea', members of the Kriminalpolizei charged the lawn in search of the rapper.

A heavy police presence at pro-Palestinian demonstrations isn't new in Germany; nor is police brutality. The weekend's events, however, represent a sharp uptick in suppression. [One video](#) shows several protesters being forced to the ground, some placed in chokeholds. One demonstrator in a kippah is shoved face-first into the dirt as he's arrested, and later carried to a police van by four members of the Kripo. With the wind knocked out of him, he continues to shout: 'Free Palestine!'

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