

# German interior minister bans Islamic conference

Justus Leicht  
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The first “Arab and Islamic Conference in Europe,” planned for the beginning of October, has been banned by the Berlin city legislature, following considerable pressure from federal Interior Minister Otto Schily.

The main objective of the congress was to “send a message of solidarity to those forgotten people under occupation in Palestine and Iraq.” Nothing extraordinary in a “liberal democracy,” one would think. Even the police and secret service admitted there were no indications linking the congress to the preparation of acts of terrorism. Berlin state Interior Minister Erhart Koerting said two weeks ago: “I have no information that this congress would be a gathering of terrorists,” adding, “No such information has been passed to me by the federal government.”

Nevertheless, a massive campaign against the congress was launched by the media and the political establishment shortly after the official announcement that it was taking place. Without knowing who would be participating, the gutter press and TV claimed “hundreds of militant Islamists” would be gathering in Berlin.

Leading the campaign was Schily (Social Democratic Party—SPD). He announced that he would “do everything to ensure this congress did not take place.” Like the Christian Democrats and Greens in the Berlin city legislature, Bavarian state Interior Minister Guenther Beckstein (Christian Social Union) also called for a ban. “Such a congress on German soil is simply unwanted,” Beckstein said in Munich.

Within a few days, the Berlin state interior minister had made an abrupt about-turn. “I will not tolerate such agitation here,” an agitated Koerting told a press conference, where he justified the ban. He stressed that political responsibility for the ban lay with the Berlin city legislature, which is controlled by a coalition of the

SPD and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). Koerting pointed out that his view was shared by Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party). Fischer had instructed German embassies to refuse visas to potential conference visitors.

The ban is a fundamental attack on freedom of assembly and opinion.

Equating anti-Semitism with criticism of the Israeli state, Interior Minister Schily claimed the conference was “anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli.” His statement was uncritically adopted by most of the media, and used by Koerting to justify the ban. As proof, the conference declaration was cited which called for solidarity with the “resistance against American and Zionist terror” in Iraq and Palestine—an appeal that falls entirely within the protections afforded to free speech under the German constitution.

Chief Federal Prosecutor Kay Nehm has even launched an investigation into possible support for terrorist organisations, but so far the authorities have failed to provide any evidence linking the congress or its organisers to terrorist organizations and their alleged activities.

The official website on which Koerting justified the congress ban cites only the conference call’s reference to “American and Zionist terror” in the occupied areas and a general appeal for support to the “resistance” and to “patriotic and Islamic liberation” movements, which, the congress call declares, have the right to all “legitimate” means of struggle. Referring to this text, the Berlin city legislature not only banned the congress, but also withdrew the German residency permit of Fadi Madi, the congress general coordinator, deporting him forthwith to Lebanon.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has principled differences with the perspective of Arab and Islamic

nationalism, and opposes terrorist methods. However, that does not alter the fact that it is the occupation of Iraq and not the resistance against it that runs contrary to international law. Even UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently pointed out that the invasion of Iraq was illegal.

The people of Iraq and other occupied peoples have the right to resist foreign occupation—a right that is recognized under international law.

Israel's decades-long occupation of Palestine violates innumerable UN resolutions. Two decades ago, Sharon was relieved of his position as defence secretary because an Israeli government commission concluded he bore "personal responsibility" for massacres carried out by Christian militias in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

At the same time the conference ban was being announced, the UN Secretary General again denounced the actions of the Israeli army against the Palestinians.

In an interview he gave shortly before announcing the conference ban, Interior Minister Schily solidarised himself with the illegal actions of the Israeli government. He defended the wall being built by Israel in Palestinian areas, which only two months previously had been declared illegal by the International Court of Justice in the Hague, saying, "Whoever draws a comparison with the Berlin Wall is wrong, because this is not about locking people up, robbing them of their liberty; Israel is protecting itself against terrorists.... The fact that Israel is trying to build a protective fence, which has proved effective, is understandable and I believe that any criticism does not take into account this reality."

Schily says it is "understandable" to defend an illegal occupation by carrying out actions that are illegal under international law, but those who condemn this and express solidarity with the resistance must reckon with bans and deportation.

It is no coincidence that this campaign took place at the same time as mass demonstrations against the German government's so-called "Hartz IV" welfare and labour market "reforms," and state elections in Brandenburg and Saxony. Shortly after making his utterances against the freedom of assembly and opinion, Schily bemoaned the decision made last year by the German Constitutional Court to disallow the

banning of the right-wing extremist German National Democratic Party (NPD).

The ban was initiated by Schily, but then rejected by the Constitutional Court after it became clear that the leadership of the NPD had been massively infiltrated by German state agents. Schily declared that the entry of the NPD into the Saxony legislature was "the result of a very problematic decision of the Constitutional Court."

In fact, the main responsibility for the electoral success of the fascistic NDP rests with the SPD-Green Party coalition government, which has launched an unprecedented assault on the living standards and social rights of working people, evoking growing popular opposition. Under conditions where the entire media and political establishment, including the trade union bureaucracy, supports the anti-working class measures, the extreme right is able to exploit the legitimate anger of broad masses of working and poor people.

The message is clear. The German interior minister has only one answer to any opposition to government policy—state repression, irrespective of its undemocratic and illegal nature.



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