

The case of Nemi El-Hassan: German television channel sacks critical journalist

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The case of Nemi El-Hassan exemplifies how Germany's ruling circles utilise the extreme right to silence leftist opinion and suppress any criticism of their own politics.

The 28-year-old journalist and doctor of Palestinian origin was lined up to present the science programme "Quarks" on the public TV channel Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) but was sacked before her work had even begun. The reason given was completely unfounded accusations of anti-Semitism, first raised by far-rightists with proven links to Germany's domestic intelligence agency (the Office for the Protection of the Constitution). These false accusations were then blown up out of all proportion by the country's leading gutter press organ, the *Bild* newspaper.

Despite the support of hundreds of celebrities, including the former Israeli ambassador to Germany, Avi Primor, and the renowned historian and anti-Semitism expert Moshe Zimmermann, nothing could save El-Hassan. On November 2, WDR finally broke off all negotiations with her.

Nemi El-Hassan's reporting: "quick-witted, confrontational, fearless"

El-Hassan has proven herself to be a courageous journalist, writing articles for leading German newspapers on the rise of the far right and xenophobia. She has also contributed to the television program "Frontal21" and, since 2013, has been involved in the YouTube channel "Dattelträger," which targets anti-Muslim prejudice using satirical videos. She has received numerous prizes and awards for her work.

She hosted the programme "Jäger und Sammler" (Hunters and Collectors), which deals with socially relevant topics. One contribution dealt with a far-right rock concert in July 2017, when 6,000 neo-fascists from all over Europe gathered in the small town of Themar in the East German state of Thuringia. El-Hassan, who still wore a headscarf at that time, spoke with and confronted the organiser of the concert, Tommy Frenck, a former candidate for the fascist German National Democratic Party (NPD). Although she no longer wears a headscarf, she is invariably portrayed wearing one by right-wing media outlets.

For her intervention at the far-right concert, she was awarded the European CIVIS Online Media Prize. The jury's statement read: "The reporter courageously went into the crowd and quizzed members of the far-right milieu in a manner that was quick-witted, confrontational and fearless. The rhetorical patterns of the neo-Nazis become clear. An outstanding journalistic achievement—superbly realised visually."

When it became known that El-Hassan was going to be employed by WDR, it was far-right bloggers, of all people, who accused her of "anti-Semitism." The accusation is based on a seven-year-old video, dating from Israel's invasion of Gaza, which claimed the lives of over 1,000

Palestinians. The video features El-Hassan as a young woman taking part in the Al-Kuds march in Berlin. In that year, 2014, Al-Kuds Day, ("international Jerusalem Day") was directed against the assault launched against Palestinians in Gaza. Anti-Israeli slogans were shouted at the demonstration and symbols of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah movement were on display.

The media outlet Zeit Online conclusively demonstrated that the accusations of anti-Semitism against El-Hassan stemmed from far-right circles with links to the xenophobic Alternative for Germany (AfD). The anti-Muslim activist Irfan Peci published footage of the Al-Kuds march on October 9 and was jubilant when the *Bild* newspaper picked up the story a month later.

Peci, who is 31, worked for the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) for a long time. As an adolescent, Peci, the son of a Bosnian immigrant family, had joined the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda and became its leading voice in Germany. After his arrest, he was recruited by the BfV as an undercover agent to spy on Islamists. Since his exposure as a BfV agent, Peci has operated as a self-proclaimed "Islamist hunter" with extensive links to Germany's far-right milieu.

The latter deliberately use the accusation of anti-Semitism to discriminate against Muslims. When the far-right elements linked to Peci celebrated their success on the internet following El-Hassan's sacking by WDR, one of them noted that exploiting the "Jewish issue" was a particularly effective instrument.

Although launched by the far right, the accusations against El-Hassan were eagerly picked up by the *Bild* newspaper and supplemented with further allegations in an initial article on September 13. As El-Hassan herself notes: the newspaper linked "video snippets taken out of context from an oral contribution, which I recorded years ago on behalf of the Federal Agency for Civic Education, and in which I—supplemented by scientific Islamic sources—explained my understanding of the term 'jihad.' An editorially approved contribution, it should be noted, [that was] supervised by one of Germany's most renowned Islamic scholars."

On the same day, the AfD published a press release in which the party's deputy spokesperson Beatrix von Storch denounced El-Hassan as a "virulent Islamist and Jew-hater" and "terrorist sympathiser."

The claims were immediately taken up by leading German language newspapers, including the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. The latter ran the headline: "When it comes to Muslims who hate Jews—it's not taken too seriously in Germany."

El-Hassan has publicly distanced herself from her participation in the 2014 Al-Kuds march and apologised for her behaviour at the time. She has also repeatedly affirmed that she does not question Israel's right to exist, but this did not prevent WDR from taking action against her. The station does not tolerate any form of anti-Semitism, it said in a statement. It was prepared to check whether she could work on the programme as an author, but she could not appear in front of camera.

Discussions followed in the station's committees and in the

broadcasting council, while the mainstream media used the “anti-Semitism” accusation to whip up sentiments against El-Hassan. Prominent journalist Jochen Bittner hypocritically warned that one should not “judge too harshly,” while going on to doubt the credibility of her apology and stressing on German radio that WDR’s decision was correct.

Finally, more “anti-Semitism” accusations were dug up against El-Hassan. She was accused of “liking” anti-Semitic postings on social networks—postings that she subsequently deleted.

The new accusations referred to postings calling for a boycott of goods from settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories—i.e., trade which the European Union considers to be impermissible—as well as postings dealing with the escape of six imprisoned Palestinians from an Israeli maximum-security prison. El-Hassan explained that it was not clear why they were in prison in the first place. Her comments were deliberately ignored in order to accuse her of “encouraging acts of violence.”

Although El-Hassan has publicly, unequivocally and repeatedly rejected all forms of anti-Semitism, the right-wing media and representatives of Jewish associations maintained their offensive, demanding that WDR end its cooperation with the journalist. WDR dutifully obeyed on November 2.

Personal statement

On the same day, El-Hassan presented her side of the case in a guest article for the *Berliner Zeitung*. Under the title “I am a Palestinian—deal with it!” she described the nightmare she had gone through during the past weeks: “One learns that the effectiveness of one’s own actions and thus one’s influence on decisive events is null and void. A loss of control that is brutal in its absoluteness. That’s how it feels when the *Bild* newspaper makes it its business to publicly demolish you.”

At the same time, she made clear she would not back down: “I am not what they want to make me into, nor am I a helpless victim. I have a voice. And I will use the opportunity to make my point of view known, along with everybody else.”

In the article, she details the campaign against her and describes her personal and family history as well as the fate of her close relatives in Palestine and Lebanon: “My family history is closely connected to the history of the state of Israel. My grandmother had to flee several times when Israel came into being. The village where my father was born no longer exists. My mother was shot as a teenager by Israeli soldiers in the narrow streets of her home village in southern Lebanon ...”

On the day the article appeared, WDR finally terminated its cooperation with her. The perfidious reason given was that the controversy surrounding her had led to an “inappropriate politicisation of the renowned science programme.” WDR thus blames the victim of a campaign for which the broadcaster shares responsibility.

The *Berliner Zeitung* and *Die Zeit* also report that in its meetings with the young journalist, WDR apparently asked questions that were not only insensitive and in bad taste, but also violated Germany’s labour laws. According to a transcript, El-Hassan was allegedly asked: “Do you pray and if so, how often? Do you observe fasting? Is your grandmother’s flight a topic at family gatherings?”

Support for El-Hassan

The journalist was able, however, to win the support of prominent figures, including Jewish intellectuals, who demanded she be treated

fairly. Hundreds of academics, authors and cultural workers signed an open letter, including the winner of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, Caroline Emcke, and the well-known pianist Igor Levit.

The open letter reads: “We are appalled by the defamatory and denunciatory way in which this discussion is being conducted.” It continues, “Nemi El-Hassan has become a target for hate and incitement because of her Palestinian origin and Muslim identity.” The signatories state that the campaign against El-Hassan has “racist undertones”.

One of the first signatories of the Open Letter was Ralf Michaels, director of the Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law in Hamburg. Michaels pointed out that El-Hassan has been treated in a very unfair manner. At no point was it made clear that the demonstration took place in 2014 at the time of the Gaza war, “when emotions were running high everywhere.” At that time El-Hassan had written articles in favour of rapprochement, reconciliation and against violence—which were also not reported. In addition, journalistic contributions in which she clearly argued against anti-Semitism were suppressed. El-Hassan had won media prizes for these essays.

The Jewish journalist Jochanan Shelliem stated that there was a concerted campaign behind the claims of anti-Semitism levelled against El-Hassan and other media professionals. Shelliem commented in @mediasres, an online German newspaper, that women journalists like her were being increasingly discriminated against. The Springer printing house, which publishes *Bild*, evidently sought to cover over “any visible brown stains on its own shirt.”

The historian Moshe Zimmermann and Israel’s ex-ambassador to Germany, Avi Primor, wrote a joint statement defending the journalist against accusations of anti-Semitism and declaring WDR’s treatment of her “to be illegitimate.”

A right-wing shift in the media

At the same time, the decision made by WDR has won the approval of most German media outlets. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, for example, commented that every line in El-Hassan’s guest article for the *Berliner Zeitung* showed “why it was correct that Nemi El-Hassan should not become the face of a public service programme.”

The SZ argued that the justified reason for her dismissal was not the accusations of anti-Semitism, but rather a “fundamental misunderstanding of what journalism is. While the private person is quite entitled to their point of view, and activists obliged to defend their point of view, it is the journalist’s job to recognise that their standpoint is not necessarily shared by all. El-Hassan fails to do this in every line. She suppresses the fact that there are all manner of alternatives.”

This comment sheds light on a fatal misunderstanding of the role of journalists that has recently become increasingly apparent in the media, especially on the WDR. What is demanded and promoted as seemingly “objective” reporting is in fact increasingly geared to the wishes and needs of the ruling class. Any criticism of the latter is no longer permitted.

The fact that this attitude is becoming more and more dominant on the WDR is connected not least to the appointment in May this year of the right-wing conservative Christine Strobl to head the ARD. The WDR produces about one quarter of programs for the ARD, Germany’s leading public service channel. Christine Strobl is the daughter of CDU grandee and Bundestag president Wolfgang Schäuble and the wife of Baden-Württemberg’s Interior Minister Thomas Strobl. She has introduced significant changes since taking over the ARD.

Christine Strobl’s close links to the CDU leadership and right-wing ruling circles is part of the transformation of the ARD, described in the

1970s as “red radio,” into a state broadcaster, increasingly susceptible to pressure from right-wing politicians while disseminating right-wing propaganda.

El-Hassan writes in her article in the *Berliner Zeitung* that “certain topics were never openly negotiated”: “There was no honest discussion on how to distinguish anti-Semitism from positions which are critical of Israel. Or what Germany’s responsibility is towards human rights violations in Israel/Palestine.” The journalist correctly warns that the behaviour of WDR “has opened the door wide open for future campaigns.”



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