

# Germans, Israelis Fight for Right to Criticize Sharon

by Rainer Apel

For many years Yamal Karsli, a Syrian-born German, who has lived in Germany for more than 20 years, was a member of the Green Party, and, since 1995, also a member of the parliament in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (N.R.W.). He has focussed his political work on such issues as the integration of immigrants, and he has also been strongly critical of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. No one ever bothered, throughout all these years, to think there was anything wrong with his exercise of free speech, whatever else they may have thought about its content.

But after the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dramatically escalated in the recent weeks under Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, with the Green Party leadership remaining more or less indifferent to the Middle East crisis, Karsli decided to leave the Green Party in early May. He has retained his seat in the state parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia, but decided to join the Free Democratic Party (FDP), whose chairman in N.R.W., is Jürgen Möllemann, who also has been a harsh critic of Sharon. Möllemann, the national FDP vice chairman, is the head of the German-Arab Society, of which Karsli is also a member. From the moment that Karsli joined the FDP, Green Party heavyweight Foreign Minister Joschka

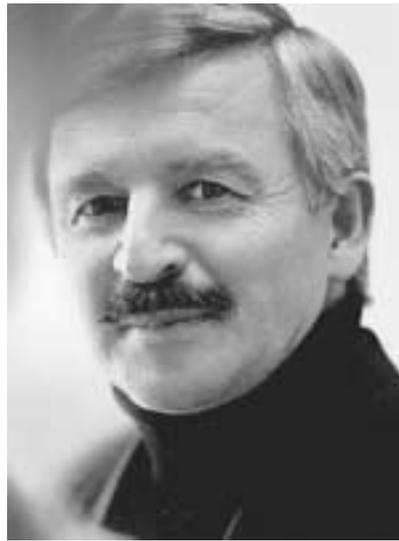
Fischer, and other Green leaders launched a vicious propaganda campaign against the FDP, alleging that it is a "haven for anti-Semites."

In a parallel escalation, Michel Friedman, the vice president of the Council of Jews in Germany, has repeatedly made the blanket slander that any Germans who criticize Sharon and the Israeli Defense Forces' policies are "anti-Semites." Now he has demanded that not only should Karsli be expelled from the FDP, but that the FDP should also expel Möllemann, unless he retract his views on Sharon. To which Möllemann responded by charging Friedman with "megalomania" and "using the language of hate." Möllemann reiterated his own view that there "is a moral obligation to criticize Sharon for his war-mongering policy."

## Heavy-Handed Intimidation

The hysteria crescendoed on May 17, when Green Party leader Claudia Roth filed a lawsuit against Möllemann for allegedly "promoting incitement to hate." This referred to his remarks the day before, when Möllemann had charged that Friedman's "hateful polemics provoke the growth of anti-Semitism." At the same time, in Israel, police on May 21 raided the home of Dr. Bernhard Blanke, the director of the Israeli branch of the FDP-linked Friedrich Naumann Foundation, who is known for being a critic of Sharon, as well. The trumped-up charge brought against Blanke was that the police had "leads" intimating that Blanke might have planned to supply Palestinian terrorists with information on Israeli military targets. The frame-up was such a ham-handed publicity stunt, however, that even Foreign Minister Fischer had to intervene, and the lurid accusations were dropped. All of this was, naturally, not unrelated to the scheduled visit of FDP Chairman Guido Westerwelle to Israel, during the last week of May, for which meetings had been scheduled with Sharon and other Israeli leaders, as well as with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

On May 22, Möllemann announced



*Jamal Karsli (left) and Jürgen Möllemann are both under fire in Germany for daring to voice public criticism of Israel's Ariel Sharon.*



German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (left) with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Fischer, a Green party leader, made himself into Sharon's mouthpiece, by denouncing the Free Democratic Party as "a haven for anti-Semites."

that Karsli had withdrawn his application to join the FDP, but would remain associated with the FDP caucus in the N.R.W. state parliament. Möllemann stated that he had received more than 14,000 supportive e-mails within a few days, and that he would not refrain from his criticism of Friedman and Sharon. On May 23, numerous German dailies decided to publish Karsli and Möllemann's statements, which reviewed the entire controversy and explicitly attacked the intolerance of "political correctness" in Germany. The "war of nerves" will continue, but Möllemann and Karsli have not backed down on the core issue: that German criticism of Israeli policies cannot be suppressed by slandering the critic as an "anti-Semite."

### Avneri: 'Germans Have the Right To Criticize Israel'

While all of this escalation between the German supporters and critics of Sharon was going on, the government-owned Deutschland Radio (DLR) made a very important intervention on May 27, which forced the public's attention back to the fact that Sharon's policy has also met fierce opposition inside Israel. DLR interviewed leading Israeli peace activist Uri Avneri, whose first remark was that, in his view, Germans should have the same right as other people to criticize Israel's policy, and that it was wrong to disqualify any criticism of Israel as being "anti-Semitic." "Sometimes I have the impression that our Jewish friends in Germany are exaggerating. They are totally one-sided in taking the side of the Israeli government of Mr. Sharon, which means against the Israeli peace movement, against a part of public opinion in Israel which opposes Sharon's present policy. This is not a position

for Israel, but rather a position for Sharon, for the Israeli government.

"To endorse any policy only because it is pursued by the present government of Israel, is amoral, in my view. Either this government is good or bad; you can have different opinions on that. Israel is a very differentiated country. We have many opinions, there. A few days ago, we had a giant rally of 70,000 Israelis in Tel Aviv, against the policy of this government, against the occupation of the Palestinian territories, against the military operations against the Palestinians. This, too, is Israel, and in my view, it is the real Israel, the true Israel.

"Mr. Sharon is pursuing other objectives than peace, and as long as he is in power, there will not be a single step toward peace. In reality, he wants Israel to annex the Palestinian territories—at least continue the occupation. This is a clear policy. There will never be a Palestinian state, as long as Mr. Sharon is in power, and without a Palestinian state, there will not be peace."

If things don't change, Avneri warned, what there will be is a non-stop spiral of terrorism and counter-terrorism, with no end in sight.

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