

Oberbürgermeister Marcel Philipp
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11 October 2019

Dear Mayor Philipp,

We were disconcerted to learn that your decision to withdraw the city's support for the 2019 Aachen City Art Prize ceremony was based on "tips" and "inquiries" about the political views of Walid Raad, the award winner. The political stance you feel it is urgent to denounce is the, alleged, world-renowned Lebanese-American artist's support for the civil society "BDS campaign." As you are probably aware, many artists and intellectuals advocate for the recognition and implementation of legal rights, worldwide. Rather than recognize this advocacy as a form of democratic engagement, you regard Mr Raad's commitment to the rights of Palestinians to be scandalous, and worthy of condemnation.

We, on the contrary, are scandalized that you'd make your approval of the city's decision to honor Walid Raad's dependant upon his disavowal of the BDS movement. Palestinians living in Israel, in the territory Israel occupies – in violation of international law –, and in the Diaspora have the same inalienable rights you yourself enjoy as a German citizen. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign was launched in 2005 by a broad alliance of Palestinian civil society, which requested nothing more than that all "people with a sense of justice" make use of peaceful means to pressure the State of Israel to fulfill its obligations, as mandate by international law.

To demand that Mr Raad renounce the BDS campaign is not a legitimate request. That would amount to tacitly endorsing the confused reasoning with which you justify your demand. You argue that both the German Parliament and the NRW State Parliament have found "the BDS movement to be anti-Semitic... because it essentially questions or denies Israel's right to exist." This is an extremely biased and erroneous assessment of the BDS, and of democratic debate.

To treat an assessment reached by a parliamentary majority like a royal decree is fundamentally at odds with democratic practices. The gravity of the charge of anti-Semitism calls all of us—and you as a political office-holder especially—to be careful and considerate in our examination of this case, as well as independent in our position.

Pointing out that a state's has obligations towards those living inside its borders under human rights and international law and trying to persuade it to fulfill those obligations is not equivalent to questioning or denying its right to existence. To equivocate criticism of Israeli

policy toward the Palestinians with anti-Semitism, on the other hand, requires one to view Israel as identical to the Jewish collective, therefore making all Jews responsible for Israel's policies – a view that in our opinion, and contrary to yours, does veer onto Antisemitism. The BDS campaign does not conflate the state of Israel's policies with the Jewish population, either inside or outside Israeli borders – as your research should have shown. It targets institutions and businesses (often international, and not necessarily Israeli) with boycott, disinvestment, and sanctions, as many other civic society campaigns do. It is a campaign meant to pressure a state to recognize and honor the rights of those it discriminates against, it is not a campaign meant to discriminate against a state or its people, and it has nothing in common with the resentment of Jews, which is the essence of anti-Semitism. Given the dangerous increase of anti-Semitism in Germany today, we find it deeply disturbing that a German mayor would not be seriously willing to engage and debate this matter.

You were bothered by the thought of the City of Aachen awarding an artist who (by supporting the BDS campaign, as you claim) “opposes artistic and cultural exchange.” In fact, the BDS movement criticizes Israeli cultural institutions and individual artists (including non-Israelis) who justify and whitewash Israeli policies that violate international law – or downplay these policies in the service of Israeli public relations: In no way does that hinder artistic and cultural exchange. On the contrary, it makes this exchange more inclusive.

What is the significance of an award like the Aachen City Art Prize? The prize is intended to help make an artistically valuable oeuvre become better known and supported – and to promote appreciation for and debate about the work in Germany. An award like this contributes to artistic and cultural exchange.

Do you believe that by discrediting artists who support Palestinian rights – indiscriminately and without any serious examination – you are supporting artistic and cultural exchange?

There are a great many reputable sources of information about BDS that you could have consulted before coming to your judgement, and deciding to withdraw the City of Aachen's support for the 2019 prizewinner, Walid Raad. Here are two:

The Administrative Court of Cologne: The Administrative Court's proceedings regarding the German-Palestinian Women's Association versus the Federal City of Bonn
http://www.justiz.nrw.de/nrwe/ovgs/vg_koeln/j2019/14_L_1765_19_Beschluss_20190912.html

The BDS Movement's position on boycotting individuals
<https://www.bdsmovement.net/news/bds-movement-position-boycott-individuals>

As we have explained, your decision to withdraw support for Walid Raad as the 2019 winner of the Aachen City Art Prize lacks any basis.

We ask you to accept the jury's proper decision to honor an excellent artist and his work with the Aachen City Art Prize and to not prevent the presentation ceremony being held on city property.

Yours sincerely,

BDS Berlin

BDS Initiative Oldenburg

Comité pour une Paix Juste au Proche-Orient (CPJPO), Luxembourg

ECCP - European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine, Belgien

Jewish Antifa Berlin

Jüdische Stimme für gerechten Frieden in Nahost e.V.

Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC)

Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI)

Palestinian Panthers Deutschland

Palestine speaks - Coalition for Palestinian Rights and Against Racism

Pericentre Projects, Cairo

Gilbert Achcar

Avi Berg, Berlin

Federica Buetti, art critic / editor, Berlin.

Sophia Deeg, author/translator, Berlin

Marguerite d'Huart, Frankreich

Hermann Dierkes, former member of the City Council of Duisburg

Nancy du Plessis, documentary filmmaker/solo performerin, Berlin

Dror Dayan, filmmaker/film scholar, John Moores University, Liverpool, GB

Pary El-Qalqili, filmmaker, Berlin

Claudio Feliziani, filmmaker, Berlin

Dominik Finkelde, Professor of Philosophy, Munich School of Philosophy

Sylvia Finzi, artist, Berlin/London

Ruth Fruchtman, author, Berlin

Jochen Gester, Trade unionist and publisher, Berlin

Doris Ghannam, Berlin

Nathan Gray, artist, Berlin

Hartmut Heller, sociologist, Munich

Dr. Renate Hürtgen, historian, Berlin

Shahira Issa, artist Hamburg/Cairo

Ellen Keller, Munich

Angela Klein, Köln

Elfriede Krutsch, Berlin

Dr. Hadas Leonov, software developer, Heidelberg

Marcella Lista, curator, Centre Pompidou

Anna Regina Mackowiak, Munich

Jumana Manna, artist, Berlin

Gabriele Martin, Berlin

Mónica Martins Nunes, visual artist, Portugal

Miranda Pennell, artist/filmmaker, UK

Agnieszka Polska, artist

John Smith, artist/filmmaker, UK

Sille Storihle

Tanya Ury, artist/writer, Cologne

Update signatures 14 October 2019