

MASTER'S THESIS

The Everyday Politics of Repression: Palestine Solidarity in Berlin

Submitted by Shyama Asen, BSc MSc

Student Number: s1149210

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Supervisor: Dr. Harry G. Pettit

Radboud University, Nijmegen

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Radboud University



Abstract

For almost two years now, Berlin has witnessed repeated incidents of severe police violence and other forms of repression against those protesting or speaking out publicly against the war on Gaza. This master's thesis examines the repression experienced by people in Berlin showing solidarity with Palestine and its impact on them. Particular attention is paid to whether and how their perception of democracy in Germany has changed. Although research exists on repression and police violence against certain political movements, as well as on Palestine solidarity movements, analysis of individual experiences in the German context is lacking. One reason for this is the marginalization of pro-Palestinian voices in German academia. This thesis aims to address this research gap. The empirical basis consists of semi-structured interviews with eight individuals affected by repression and three support organizations. The results reveal that, while the observed repression resembles familiar patterns, it increased significantly in both intensity and frequency. This results in a loss of trust in democracy among those affected. The principle of German *Staatsräson* reinforces and legitimizes these dynamics by contributing to an anti-Palestinian narrative. Overall, the situation is consistent with global trends of democratic backsliding and the repression of critical voices.

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1. Introduction

On July 11th, 2025, the counter-investigation group Forensis refuted allegations that a police officer had been attacked at a pro-Palestinian protest. On the contrary, it was proven that the police officer injured himself when he physically attacked protesters (Forensic Architecture – Counter-Investigations, 2025). Shortly thereafter, on July 15th, 2025, the Berlin police carried out house raids on individuals who had been summoned as witnesses – not as suspects, but as witnesses (Palästina Spricht, 2025). The police nevertheless stick to their statement that the police officer was deliberately injured, although there is proven evidence against this (Spiegel, 2025).

Since October 2023, the Israeli military has conducted large-scale operations in Gaza. Numerous human rights organizations and United Nations representatives have characterized the violence as genocide (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, 2024). In order to stop and highlight this terrible suffering, worldwide solidarity with Palestinians increased with a strengthening of pro-Palestinian movements and protests. Similar dynamics are observable in Berlin. Nevertheless, there has been an escalating trend in the criminalization of the pro-Palestine community within Berlin. Prior to October 2023, individuals and movements advocating for Palestine solidarity had already been targeted; however, since then, an extreme increase in both frequency and intensity of these targeted actions can be observed. The incident mentioned at the beginning of the introduction provides a pertinent illustration of the present circumstances in Berlin. The repression is not merely limited to individuals who have been apprehended by the authorities but also extends to witnesses, who may face measures such as house raids. Consequently, any individuals who emerge within this paradigm find themselves subject to criminalization and repression. For nearly two years, there has been evidence of extreme police violence at Palestine solidarity rallies, congresses and protests in Berlin, with no indication that the situation will change in the near future. Almost daily there is new footage of brutal violence against protesters – even if they are children, elderly or people with disabilities. In addition to police violence and violent arrests, there are other forms of police repression: house raids, demonstration bans, language bans, bans on symbols and bans on slogans. The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, has reprimanded these actions in a letter to German Federal Minister of the Interior: "...the Berlin authorities have imposed restrictions on the use of the Arabic language and cultural symbols in the context of the protests....I am also concerned by reports of excessive use of force by police against protesters, including minors..." (O'Flaherty, 2025).

The city of Berlin is home to the largest Palestinian diaspora in Europe. In response to the ongoing genocide, a significant number of Palestinians, along with their allies, have taken to the streets to express their solidarity. These people have lost family and loved ones and are protesting against this injustice. However, those protests are being repressed and sometimes banned on the grounds of supposedly "imminent danger" as well as "glorification of violence", thereby constructing Palestinians as a violent

threat (Thompson & Tuzcu, 2024, p. 5). The situation in Palestine is not comparable to the situation in Berlin and yet the genocide of the Palestinians is linked to the repression in Berlin. It is part of a deeply racially rooted stigmatization of Palestinian life as a “security threat”. This legitimizes the fact that Palestinian voices are not only not heard but actively silenced.

Despite the significant media and political attention since October 2023, there are only a few empirical studies that address the repressive experiences of pro-Palestinian activists in Berlin. The ELSC, European Legal Support Center, has created an Index of Repression, in which reported incidents are structured and collected (European Legal Support Center & Forensic Architecture, 2025). While discourse analyses and legal observations (Thompson & Tuzcu, 2024; Bateman, 2025) are already extant, there is a deficiency of qualitative, experience-based analyses that reveal how those affected experience repression, how they react to it, and how it shapes their understanding of democracy and the rule of law. The present study aims to address this gap by employing qualitative interviews with Palestine solidarity activists in Berlin.

This study is of considerable societal and scientific importance. The societal significance lies in the fact that this study elucidates the manner in which experiences of repression by pro-Palestinian activists influence democratic perceptions and political inclusion in Berlin. The study contributes to critically questioning hegemonic narratives and enriching the democratic debate on freedom of expression and assembly. Further, it documents the voices of affected activists. By amplifying these voices, the work aims to re-establish marginalized perspectives within the public discourse. This phenomenon is of particular societal significance, as the legitimacy of democratic systems is contingent upon the articulation of voices that are often marginalized or disempowered.

From an academic perspective, the relevance of this thesis is further substantiated by the findings of current research. Younes and Al-Taher (2024) posit that following October 7th, 2023, German educational institutions - ranging from schools to universities - have evolved into pivotal venues for the enforcement of the German *Staatsräson*¹, which is characterized by unwavering solidarity with Israel. Palestinian perspectives are systematically rendered invisible, and expressions of pro-Palestinian solidarity are criminalized. Universities, which have traditionally conceptualized themselves as bastions of academic freedom, are thus increasingly operating as domains of surveillance, discipline, and exclusion of students who advocate for Palestine. Despite the fact that certain studies have examined the role of the German *Staatsräson* and the discourses surrounding antisemitism and Palestine solidarity (Younes & Al-Taher, 2024), there has been a paucity of empirical research until the present day that focuses on the experiences of pro-Palestinian activists in Germany. In their 2024 study, Younes and Al Taher provide a systematic analysis of the marginalization of solidarity with Palestine within the German education system, media, and public discourse. Thompson and Tuzcu (2024) identify the various forms of repression prevalent in Germany, delineating the actors responsible for their implementation. These seminal works substantiate the assertion that repression is not a recent phenomenon, but rather, it is deeply entrenched within the

¹ “Reason of state” (own translation). This term will be explained further in chapter 2.4.

very fabric of German society. While most of the research focuses on discourses, legal frameworks, or media coverage, this study examines qualitatively how those affected experience repression in everyday life, how they deal with it, and how this shapes their understanding of democracy. Furthermore, the study elucidates that the present circumstances are indicative of a novel manifestation of democratic repression. While repression in democracies has already been extensively researched – for example in the context of police violence against protests (della Porta & Reiter, 1998), or the long-term effects of authoritarian rule on democracies (Martins, 2025) – the dynamics observed here represent a qualitatively new pattern. Consequently, the study contributes to the resolution of this research gap.

Considering these observations, a comprehensive research question has been formulated, encompassing four subsidiary inquiries:

How do people experience and cope with repression due to their solidarity with Palestine in Berlin and how has it influenced their understanding of democracy in Germany?

1. Which manifestations of repression are experienced?
2. Which coping mechanisms and strategies of resistance do affected individuals employ?
3. What influence does the German Staatsräson have in the legitimization of repression?
4. How do experiences of repression shape understandings of democracy and belonging?

The thesis is structured as follows: This introduction is followed by the conceptual framework of this study in which the various concepts that are used to explain repression and its manifestations are presented. This includes an examination of the various forms of repression and their effects on the individuals affected, a discussion of democratic backsliding and the erosion of democratic rights, as well as an introduction to the principle of German Staatsräson and its effects. The methodology section then outlines the approach and ethical considerations that were considered when conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews. This is followed by the main part of this thesis, in which the findings are presented and analyzed. The thesis concludes with the presentation of the main findings and the answering of the research question, followed by reflections on the limitations of the research and the provision of recommendations for future studies.

2. Conceptual Framework

In order to analyze the repression of Palestine solidarity in Berlin it is necessary to situate the findings both historically as well as in the existing scientific literature and research on repression. This chapter aims to inform the following analysis by firstly historicizing my research within broader tendencies of (“Western”) democracies. Secondly, it is portrayed what is meant by “repression”, how it manifests and what forms of repression are being observed and categorized by the scientific community. Further, the experience and effects of repression for individuals and the social realm are being theorized. Lastly, the ordering principle of German Staatsräson will be explained since it is of a pivotal relevance in this case.

2.1. Democratic Backsliding

“We are witnessing a backsliding in democracy everywhere in the world, even in the most advanced democracy, it is a movement into the bad — in the wrong direction”, said Alain Berset, former Swiss president who heads the Council of Europe, during the 2025 Davos Summit (The Associated Press, 2025). This evaluation of the status of democracy in 2025 has been a significant topic of discussion in academic discourse. In contrast to earlier dynamics of democratization and authoritarianism, the current phenomenon is characterized above all by the fact that democracy no longer fails abruptly through military coups or revolutions, but rather through a gradual process carried out mostly by democratically elected governments that enforce authoritarian tendencies within legal structures and instrumentalize existing institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018). This process is known in democratic theory as “democratic backsliding”. Bermeo (2016, pp. 5-6) defines democratic backsliding as the gradual dismantling of democratic rights within formal institutions while maintaining elections. Autocratization, on the other hand, generally describes the process by which a political system becomes more authoritarian and less democratic (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, pp. 3-4). Democratic backsliding specifically concerns democracies, whereas autocratization can also refer to authoritarian regimes. The result of democratic backsliding can be an “illiberal democracy”, in which elections still take place but elements such as the rule of law, separation of powers, and fundamental rights are restricted. This can be understood as the final stage of the backsliding process, where democratic institutions exist only formally, as is the case in Hungary under Orbán and in Turkey under Erdoğan (Waldner & Lust, 2018, pp. 4-6; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 21-23).

For many researchers, global democratization reached its peak in the 1990s. After the end of the Cold War, there was hope that democracies would continue to stabilize and liberalize. One of the most prominent supporters of this idea was Francis Fukuyama who, in the early 1990s, proclaimed the “end of history”, where all other systems have failed in favor of democracy and capitalism (Fukuyama, 1989). However, in the 2000s an erosion of democratic structures was observed (Bermeo, 2016, p. 6; Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 96; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 6-7) – a third wave of autocratization, as Lührmann and

Lindberg (2019) term it: “Ruling elites shy away from sudden, drastic moves to autocracy and instead mimic democratic institutions while gradually eroding their functions” (p. 2).

Bermeo (2016) emphasizes that modern authoritarian developments no longer occur through violent overthrows, but through legalistic strategies. Bermeo calls this “executive aggrandizement”. Likewise, blatant electoral fraud, which in the past characterized elections in many developing democracies, has been replaced by long-term “strategic harassment” and manipulation (p. 6). Power increasingly shifts to the executive, while independent institutions such as the judiciary or the media are weakened. Mechkova et al. (2017) speak of a development in which elections continue to be held, but freedoms such as freedom of expression, press freedom, and freedom of association are systematically curtailed (p. 166). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) also mention a creeping, legally legitimized development rather than a violent upheaval – a process that operates more subtly and is harder to detect. “Democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders” (p. 9).

In numerous countries, from Hungary to Turkey, elected governments are increasingly using measures to weaken opposition actors, restrict press freedom and undermine the independence of the judiciary (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 3; Bermeo, 2016, p. 11; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 12). In political geography, this is linked to debates on “post-politics”: Political contestation is channeled into technocratic and security-oriented paths, while more radical or system-critical voices are marginalized. Mouffe (2005) describes the state of democracy as post-politics rather than politics. She describes a dynamic which leads to depoliticization through moralization instead of politicization. There is no longer a negotiation of political opposites, but rather a battle of good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, which, according to Mouffe (2005), promotes the antagonisms that put democracy under pressure (pp. 5, 72-73.). Moral classification turns opponents into evil enemies with whom agonistic conflict is no longer possible, which leads to conflicts becoming radicalized (e.g. terrorism framing) (pp. 76-78). A moral labeling of the enemy thus takes place instead of enabling a public discourse.

The cosmopolitan approach stands in contrast to “democratic backsliding”, as it claims that democracy will be strengthened across borders and includes the intervention of external or foreign institutions if democracies are failing. However, this is another approach that employs moralization. The cosmopolitan approach places more emphasis on the legitimizing function of human rights than on their factual democratic exercise. Mouffe (2005) criticizes this as following: “The new rights of cosmopolitan citizens are therefore a chimera: they are moral claims, not democratic rights that could be exercised” (p. 101). This approach sees itself as cosmopolitan, a “community of all democratic states”, but the question is who will decide which states are democratic? There is the imposition of liberal democracy, which puts more people “directly under the control of the “West”, with the argument that its model is the better suited to the implementation of human rights and universal values ... this is bound to arouse strong resistances and to create dangerous antagonisms” (p. 103). This is therefore a kind of “moral imperialism”, which is a term used to describe the idea that one country or culture should impose its morals on others.

From this perspective, the issue is not only one of foreign influence, but also of who gets to define what constitutes legitimate political speech and participation, both within and across borders. Rancière (2002) has shown a transition in the form of conflict from political debate between equals to a regime that determines in advance what may be said at all and what is only “noise”. In other words, it is decided who is made invisible or criminalized. He says:

The police is thus first of all an order of bodies that determines the division between the ways of doing, the ways of being and the ways of saying, that is responsible for assigning these bodies to this place and that task by their names; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that is responsible for ensuring that this thing is visible and that other is not, that this word is understood as speech and that other as noise. (Rancière, 2002, p. 41)

The dynamics described by Rancière (2002), whereby certain voices are silenced, find concrete expression in the gradual and often unnoticed dismantling of democratic norms in polarized societies. Polarization and radicalization within the political landscape act as central drivers of democratic erosion. Waldner and Lust (2018) stress that in highly polarized contexts, political elites have incentives to secure lasting advantages within the existing democratic framework. This is done by bending rules, disregarding established norms, and employing strategies that would have been unthinkable in times of greater political overlap. Individual steps are often so subtle that they can be denied or justified within a democratic discourse; however, their cumulative effect significantly weakens democracy. At the same time, increasing polarization leads parts of the electorate to ignore dangers to democracy if they perceive the opposing side’s rise to power as the greater threat (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 17).

Many governments do not resort to overt censorship but employ subtle, informal restrictions to suppress criticism. These include limiting academic and cultural freedoms, threatening civil society groups, and deliberately narrowing the range of opinions permitted in the media. Critical journalists are pressured or harassed to influence reporting. Such gradual “tightening of the screws” processes can quietly and gradually roll back democratic progress in the electoral arena (Mechkova et al., 2017, p. 166). In the past two years, an intensification of repressive measures against certain social movements has been observed in several “Western” democracies. This development coincides with security policy and identity policy crises that serve as a legitimizing framework for restrictions on fundamental rights. The literature on backsliding (Mechkova et al., 2017) shows that such phases are often accompanied by high societal polarization and are used by governments to implement measures that would be more strongly criticized in “normal” times.

Democratic backsliding can be observed both in the core areas of democratic rights and in the strategies by which these rights are systematically curtailed. The literature identifies four central arenas: freedom of assembly (Earl, 2003), freedom of opinion and expression (Davenport, 2007), civic spaces (Buyse, 2018), and economic and institutional participation (Earl, 2003). In these arenas, specific mechanisms drive the erosion of democratic quality: strategic harassment (Bermeo, 2016), shrinking civic space (Buyse, 2018),

legal and economic repression (Earl, 2003), security policy threat framing (Davenport, 2007), the state of exception (Agamben, 2003), and discursive boundary-drawing (Butler, 2004). The parallel impact in different arenas reinforces the effect, as opposition actors are weakened both materially and symbolically, and executive oversight mechanisms are sustainably undermined.

Buyse (2018) describes this process as the “squeeze of civic space,” in which civil society organizations are systematically restricted through legislation, bureaucracy, or financial control. This often undermines human rights protection, manifesting, for example, in the criminalization of activists or the restriction of freedom of assembly (Buyse, 2018, p. 13). The repertoire of restrictions includes a range of options, from passing new laws to threaten or using violence (Buyse, 2018, p. 17).

Often, it is not just that the laws and regulations put in place are problematic in themselves. It is also their arbitrary application that is. When civil society organizations are considered too critical or too much of a nuisance, states have been found to apply a range of measures under the guise of legality of existing rules, but which in effect descend into the grey zone between legal and extra-legal action. (Buyse, 2018, p. 6)

As this glimpse into the state of democracy in 2025 showed, numerous visible and invisible forms of repression are central to the process of democratic backsliding. Therefore, the following chapter will portray what is meant by “repression”, how it manifests and what forms of repression are being observed and categorized by the scientific community.

2.2. Manifestations of Repression

In the context of pro-Palestinian solidarity in Berlin, it can be argued that repression is not only manifesting in terms of control and everyday presence, but also through explicit acts of violence. The numerous acts of repression are not to be understood isolated, but rather as patterns that are deeply embedded in security discourses and practices. To analyze this realm of repression against the pro-Palestinian community in Berlin, a theoretical basis that captures the complexity of various forms of repression is necessary.

Jennifer Earl (2003) criticized the vagueness of repression research and its lack of differentiation between the various types of repression (pp. 45-46). To define repression, she suggests Tilly (1978), who describes repression as “any action by another group which raises the contender's cost of collective action” (p. 100). Davenport (2007) adds that repression does not only occur as a reaction but also proactively. According to Davenport (2007), the classic “threat model”, which describes repression as a reaction to dissent, comes too short because states can also legitimize repression in advance - “governments ‘license’ repressive action” (p. 313). Davenport (2007) distinguishes between “behavioral threats” and “political threats”. The former represents the reaction to the action and the latter the politically defined or previously proclaimed

threat (pp. 316-317). Davenport carried out an analysis of repression in the USA between 1948 and 1982 and found that “political threats” correlate more significantly with repression. Thus, it is important not only to measure the behavior to which repression is “reacted”, but research must increasingly measure the prevailing discourse or policy (pp. 324-326). Davenport (2007) puts it this way: “... we must ‘bring politics back into’ the study of state repression” (p. 333). Repression is therefore not just a passive instrument but is enforced proactively.

According to Earl (2003), previous approaches, which often do not distinguish between the different types of repression, lead to a lack of clarity in research, as different forms of repression are mixed up (pp. 45-46). Earl (2003) therefore attempts to develop a “typology of repression” (p. 49). She distinguishes between three dimensions: the identity of the repressive agent (state vs. private), the character of the repressive action (e.g. direct violence “coercion” or indirect control “channeling”) and whether the repressive action is observable (“overt” vs. “covert”) (p. 47).

Earl (2003) argues that previously the main focus was on state authorities as repressive agents, but the inclusion of private and societal actors leads to a deeper understanding of repression (p. 46). The distinction between channeling and coercion has been mentioned before but ignored by many scholars (p. 46). “Coercive repression involves shows and/or uses of force and other forms of standard police and military action (e.g. intimidation and direct violence)” (Earl, 2003, p. 48). “Channeling involves more indirect repression, which is meant to affect the forms of protest available, the timing of protests, and/or flows of resources to movements” (Earl, 2003, p. 48). The third point focuses on how observable the repression is. To summarize, she makes a strong distinction between observable and unobservable repression – although, the degree of visibility is on a continuum and cannot be clearly delineated. Whether the repression is “overt” or “covert” depends on the actors of the repression, depending on whether their actions and the purpose of their actions should not be known or are visible to the public (p. 48).

To create the typology, the various dimensions are combined, resulting in a matrix of 12 forms, which Earl (2003) classifies and underpins with examples (pp. 49-51). This shows very clearly that repression is not easy to distinguish between “hard vs. soft” but that repression is multidimensional and works on many different levels (p. 46).

Buyse (2018) speaks of a global trend towards restricting the scope of action of civil society (p. 1). A distinction is made between civil society and civic space. Civil society is

a capacious framework of civic values encompassing the space, the set of institutions, the organizations, the networks, and the behaviors situated between the state, the business world and the family. Civil society facilitates exchanges among citizens, enables communication channels between citizens and the state, promotes civic action, and advances common interests based on civility. (Buyse, 2018, p. 3)

Whereby civic space is the “layer between state, business, and family in which citizens organize, debate and act” (p. 2). According to Buyse (2018), the civic space is threatened by formal laws and procedures,

discourse and labeling (social and media narratives) as well as practical capacities (resources, funding) (pp. 5-8). As for the justification of restrictions to civic space, Buyse identifies four main modes. Firstly, democratization itself alongside with the growth of civil society is perceived as a threat and often is referred to as made possible by foreign influence and can lead to restrictive laws, such as funding controls. Secondly, economic development can benefit civic spaces through international cooperation and funding – when it is directed against the sitting government policy it is perceived as a threat as well. Thirdly, in the realm of terrorism prevention and securitization, civic spaces are restricted by justifying states of emergency through security concerns. Finally, information and media technology lead to new forms of communication and information and can have positive effects such as networking and transparency – for state actors it is used as a justification for censorship and surveillance.

The third wave of democratization can lead to the growth of civil society, which is often made possible by foreign influence, which is perceived as a threat and can lead to restrictive laws, such as funding controls, etc. When it comes to development civic spaces can actually benefit from international cooperation and funding, but there are also counter-reactions, as this cooperation is met with resistance, especially when it is directed against government policy. Civic spaces are restricted by justifying states of emergency and security concerns e.g. threat of terrorism. As with the points mentioned above, these often have positive effects, so here, too, new forms of communication and information, such as social media and the internet, have a positive effect on networking and transparency, but there can also be a negative effect, which includes censorship and surveillance (Buyse, 2018, pp. 9-11).

However, these justifications are usually based on political power interests, protection against loss of power or control over oppositional voices. This leads to the suppression of critical voices, as official narratives are instrumentalized (pp. 8-11). Buyse (2018) describes so-called “chilling effects”, which means that not only direct bans but also very arbitrarily applied laws lead to self-censorship and these indirect “chilling effects” lead to a shrinking of civic spaces - which in turn leads to a restriction of democratic participation (p. 17). Buyse also points to another form of repression that affects the extent of civic space, discourse or labelling: “The ways in which civil society actors are talked about among the general public and are labelled by authorities directly impacts on their freedom, safety, and potential to function” (Buyse, 2018, p. 6).

2.3. The Experience of Repression

In *Surveillance and Punishment* (1977), Foucault shows that modern power functions less through spectacular acts of violence than through subtle control mechanisms. Following Foucault, it can be argued that state repression is not limited to direct acts of violence, it also manifests itself in covert disciplinary practices that shape subjects and permanently influence their behavior (Foucault, 1977). Foucault’s image of the panopticon describes “a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation, independent of the person

who exercises it" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). The panopticon functions as a mechanism of permanent observation, eliminating the need for actual intervention. As Foucault emphasizes, the panopticon penetrated society with disciplinary mechanisms (Foucault, 1977, p. 209). The decisive factor is that the subjects do not know whether they are being observed and therefore constantly adapt their behavior to the supposed expectations. The mere possibility of being observed and sanctioned creates a climate of self-discipline.

Sara Ahmed (2004) adds up to the ideas of self-disciplining of Foucault in showing that emotions such as fear, shame, or anger cannot be understood as purely individual experiences, but are socially produced and regulate bodies in specific ways. She writes: "Fear works to restrict some bodies through the movement or expansion of others" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 69). Fear, thus, not only acts as an inner feeling but also structures spaces and limits freedom of movement. Activists often report that they no longer dare to participate in demonstrations or speak out publicly due to surveillance, police violence, or media stigmatization. The affective dimensions of repression hence lead to self-censorship and withdrawal, severely restricting political participation. Repression is not only carried out by laws or executive forces such as the police, but emotions such as hate also circulate and legitimize repression. These emotions create a demarcation between the "us" and the "not us" and define what is perceived as "good" and "bad" in public discourse (pp. 52-54).

Emotions can also stick to certain symbols or even entire movements, which in turn can reinforce the long-term effects of repression. Ahmed (2004) describes how, for example, the term "terrorist" "sticks" to certain bodies. By associating metonymic terms such as "Islam" and "terrorist" - even when these terms are officially presented as distinct, the linkage remains effective due to its emotional resonance, making it sufficient that all elements associated with "Islam" become implicitly labeled as "terrorist" (pp. 76-77). For those affected, such liability can lead to surveillance, generalized suspicion and concrete disadvantages such as racial profiling or not being employed.

However, Foucault's approach is primarily concerned with the subtle dimensions of power. In order to theorize explicit, physical forms of police repression, direct violence and humiliation, reference can be made to Didier Fassin (2013). In his analysis of the French anti-crime squad BAC, Fassin demonstrates that the function of policing extends far beyond the mere enforcement of the law (Fassin, 2013, p. 4). It is therefore argued that police violence is not merely an instrument of repression, but rather a practice that actively produces a supposed social order and draws boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate subjects. Through constant controls, arrests and physical interventions, law enforcement officials establish an "authoritarian moral economy", which is defined as a moral order in which the utilization of violence against specific groups is legitimized as a necessary measure (Fassin, 2013, p. 275). Fassin adds that policing practices determine which bodies are permitted to move within the confines of legitimate public space and which are not (Fassin, 2013, p. 145). He illustrates the mechanism of producing a "potential threat" through showing the disproportionate levels of repression and violence in public spaces against residents of the banlieues in France. Fassin (2013) illuminates how police violence perpetuates established

practices of social sorting and exclusion. Repression thus functions in a dual manner: It disciplines subtly through the constant presence and visible violence of the police (Foucault, 1977) and simultaneously strikes directly at the bodies of those affected (Fassin, 2013).

At the same time, repression is forcing repressed individuals to create spaces for collective resistance. Here, it becomes clear that acts of exclusion unintentionally foster spaces of connection and mutual care. bell hooks (2015) describes these spaces as “homeplace” – as a place of resistance that ensures political agency through care and solidarity: “I want to speak about the importance of homeplace in the midst of oppression and domination, of homeplace as a site of resistance and liberation struggle” (p. 43). “We can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole” (p. 49). In other words, the personal and the political meet in these “homeplaces”, allowing resilience to grow where vulnerability is shared. For activists, this becomes particularly tangible in networks and organizations that not only offer emotional support but also function as strategic safe spaces against state intimidation. Hill Collins (2000) describes how safe spaces are needed to be able to trust, speak freely and identify problems, as they are spaces where there is no surveillance from more powerful groups/elites (p. 100). This lack of surveillance is not only protective but also generative, as it opens room for creativity and strategy.

Communities are spaces of resistance. They function as collective spaces that strengthen. Experiencing repression in isolation is particularly dangerous, as the repressive process itself exacerbates social isolation; consequently, the significance of communal solidarity becomes especially evident in this context. Thus, the mere act of coming together becomes a countermeasure to the isolating logic of repression. Angela Davis (2016) expressed it as follows:

I don't know whether I would have survived had not movements survived, had not communities of resistance, communities of struggle. So, whatever I'm doing I always feel myself directly connected to those communities and I think that this is an era where we have to encourage that sense of community particularly at a time when neoliberalism attempts to force people to think of themselves only in individual terms and not in collective terms. It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism. (p. 58)

Her words underline that survival and hope are deeply relational processes, nourished by the presence of others.

This highlights how crucial communities are to keep on going. If individuals isolate, they are easier to silence. “We are not alone when we build community together” (hooks, 2015, p. 213). These structures not only serve as protection against isolation and fear but also enable activists to remain active and make solidarity visible despite repression. In this way, community functions both as a protective shield and as a driving force for resistance, transforming repression into collective strength. This transformation is not automatic but cultivated, requiring ongoing relationships and shared commitment.

2.4. The German *Staatsräson* in the Context of Repression

This chapter aims to introduce the ordering principle of German *Staatsräson*², since it is of a pivotal relevance in this study. The term *Staatsräson* is not clearly defined, but what it means today can be traced back to the philosophers Niccoló Machiavelli and Giovanni Botero: *Staatsräson* is the guiding principle which serves to secure the survival and success of a state (Deutschlandfunk, 2024). In 2008, Angela Merkel, speaking as the first German chancellor in front of the Knesset, declared that the security of Israel is “part of Germany’s *Staatsräson*”. For constitutional lawyer Marietta Auer from the Max Planck Institute, the use of the term in relation to Israel is unusual - because *Staatsräson* means that the survival of one’s own state is placed above everything else, not the survival of another state. This makes the German *Staatsräson* unique in its existence, as *Staatsräson* has never before been directed to an entity outside of one’s own state (Deutschlandfunk, 2024). However, Germany’s *Staatsräson* is not the only case, in the past. The invocation of a *Staatsräson* has also served to override law and ethics in other contexts. For example, during the Vietnam War and later by American neoconservatives after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger placed *Staatsräson* above international law “which led to military and political defeats for the US and ended in the torture chambers and lawless zones of Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Guantanamo in Cuba” (Deutschlandfunk, 2024).

According to the scientific service of the German Bundestag, the term *Staatsräson* is not used in the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany and is therefore not to be understood as a legal term. In “German state practice”, it is rather used as a guiding political principle. However, the scientific service of the German Bundestag also stated that in terms of content, *Staatsräson* does indeed have an expression in German law, specifically in the prohibition of antisemitic acts in the Criminal Code §46, §130 (incitement to hatred) and Citizenship Act § 12a (Die Wissenschaftlichen Dienste des Deutschen Bundestages, 2023). The non-legal dimension is proclaimed but ultimately relativized. Nevertheless, the *Staatsräson* as a political principle of orientation and action appears in many areas and has, especially since October 2023, been increasingly referred to by journalists and politicians in Germany. In the CDU’s basic policy program, the party that currently holds the German chancellorship, an entire section is dedicated to the *Staatsräson*. The program states that recognizing Israel’s right to exist is considered part of Germany’s core culture and must be accepted in order to integrate to the German society. Furthermore, “Israel-related antisemitism” must be combated, according to the CDU’s basic program (CDU Deutschland, pp. 2, 22, 27).

To properly understand the German *Staatsräson*, it is necessary to highlight its connection with German memory politics. Doughan (2022) argues that the remembrance of the Holocaust forms the moral foundation of German democracy. Holocaust remembrance has become a practice through which Germany underlines its democratic character, while Palestinians remain excluded from the universal human promise of “Never Again” (pp. 48-49, 62). Al-TaHER (2024) adds that the *Staatsräson* prescribes

² “Reason of state” (own translation).

viewing the Israeli-Palestinian “conflict” through the lens of the Holocaust and situates every criticism of Israel as a pro-Palestinian stance which is directed against the *Staatsräson* (p. 254). This interpretation of the *Staatsräson* facilitates unconditional solidarity with Israel while systematically erasing the Palestinian perspective through the label of antisemitism. Germany’s responsibility towards Jews is of enormous importance, but this cannot lead to the suspension of human rights or to turning a blind eye when Palestinian suffering occurs. Conversely, the *Staatsräson* – and thus the German state – does not necessarily stand behind Jews, but behind the state of Israel. Jews who criticize the state of Israel are also subject to repression. Thus, the *Staatsräson* denounces criticism of Israel as per se antisemitic – even if it is Jews who criticize Israel’s actions (Merkenich, 2024). It becomes clear that the *Staatsräson* does not allow for a pluralistic debate but rather secures hegemonic interpretive authority.

Fekete (2024) situates this dynamic within a general pattern of anti-Palestinian racism in Germany, legitimized under the guise of combating antisemitism. It is claimed that especially Palestinians and Muslims fuel antisemitism and pose a greater threat to Jews than the far right - even though the vast majority of antisemitic incidents are committed by the far right (p. 103). In the case of Germany, as Younes and Al-Taher (2024) emphasize, this racism is institutionalized in almost all areas of life, beginning in childhood. Palestinian children are criminalized for actions such as wearing a “keffiyeh” or displaying the Palestinian flag (pp. 400-402), a process Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019) calls “Unchilding”, the removal of childhood as a protective category. This aspect has severe effects on the general perception of Palestinian lives in Germany. Judith Butler (2004) shows that through social discourses, certain lives are made invisible, vulnerable, or even killable. Of central relevance is the distinction between “grievable” and “ungrievable lives” (Butler, 2004, pp. 20-22). According to the evidence at hand, only a life considered grievable is politically and morally recognized. All others are excluded from collective empathy, making them an easier target for state violence.

The ambivalent nature of the *Staatsräson* can be explained through Agamben’s (2003) concept of the “permanent state of exception”. The state of exception is an attempt to integrate the exception itself into the legal order. The legal order formally remains, but it allows certain groups to be more or less excluded from the law in the name of security, which Agamben describes as a “zone of indistinction” (p. 26). The law is not abolished but suspended in specific areas, marking a new form of repression within formal democracies. Such states of exception are nothing new and were, for example, applied after 9/11, when the U.S. Patriot Act allowed any foreigner suspected of endangering national security to be detained. The permanent state of exception is legitimized by terms such as “emergency,” “terrorism,” “crisis,” or “national security,” radically erasing any legal status of the individual (p. 3). This logic, applied to the German *Staatsräson*, means that anything pro-Palestinian can easily be seen as a threat to Israel’s security and consequently as a threat to the German state itself. Pro-Palestinian statements or actions are therefore instinctively seen as a condition in which the law gets suspended in order to “protect” it. The state produces a zone of lawlessness in which certain groups – such as migrants, activists, or minorities – become “homo sacer”: People who legally exist but are without protection (Agamben, 2003, pp. 18-19;

Agamben, 2002, p. 3). Agamben (2003) further argues that the state of exception is a state-produced legal space in which the law is withdrawn while the state claims to act in the name of the law (pp. 3-6). Agamben shows that this type of governance formally occurs within the framework of democratic order yet substantively allows for authoritarian elements (Agamben, 2003, pp. 31-33).

This chapter showed that the German Staatsräson and its interpretation solely directed to the security of the State of Israel serves as an overarching principle and framework for domestic and foreign policy. In the context of this study, the Staatsräson is therefore regarded as a central principle that defines the boundaries of legitimate political subjectivity and influences the portrayal and treatment of Palestinian solidarity.

3. Methodology

In order to gather in-depth insights into the ongoing systematic repression when it comes to people who are in solidarity with Palestine in Berlin, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who experienced repression because of their solidarity with Palestine and with people which are documenting or supporting people who faced repression. A qualitative method was chosen due to its capacity to get in-depth conversations and ask detailed questions. The aim is to use narrative accounts to gain insights into concrete experiences of repression, their political classification and their psychological, social and political impacts. Qualitative data collection understands social phenomena from the perspective of the actors involved, whereas quantitative research deals with the distribution of a phenomenon in a society (Prainsack, 2021, p. 15). Since I wanted to explore the experiences, thoughts and narratives of my interlocutors, a qualitative approach appeared more suitable, as I could go into great depth with my questions and give the interviewees freedom in answering the questions.

3.1. Research Design

The data for this research was collected through semi-structured interviews within the study area of Berlin. Although semi-structured interviews use an interview guide that leads the interviewer through the conversation when it comes to the relevant topics and questions, they do not specify the order of the topics or the possible answers. The interviewees can answer freely and delve deeper into the topic, as the interview is only thematically oriented to the guide (Misoch, 2019, p. 13).

The participants can be divided into two groups: The major group consisted of individuals who faced forms of repression themselves due to their solidarity with Palestine. In this group, I interviewed eight people whereas one interview was with two participants simultaneously. Another planned interview could not be conducted due to personal reasons, but a statement was made. The selection of the respective participants was based on their experiences of repression. Initially, it was planned to speak with all persons who faced repression in any way and are open to speak about it. Hence, my final selection included two broader topics of repression: Institutional and public repression (e.g. at the workplace) and police violence (primarily at protests and manifestations). These different forms of repression do not happen isolated and are often intertwined. Therefore, it often happened that participants were facing not only one but multiple forms of repression. The second group I interviewed consisted of people who work for a documenting and/or supporting organization. In this group, I interviewed three persons, one from ELSC (European Legal Support Center), one from ReachOut and a freelance journalist who is working in the field. The ELSC is an organization defending and empowering the Palestine solidarity movement in Europe through legal means in mainland Europe and Britain (European Legal Support Center, n.d.). ReachOut is a

counseling center for victims of racist and right-wing violence and threats in Berlin. ReachOut also advises those affected by racial profiling and racist police violence (ReachOut Berlin, n.d.).

The interview requests were mostly made through direct messages via Instagram or email. Some of the potential interviewees were already known to me, whereas I obtained the contact details of others through mutual friends and support organizations. In order to not exhaust the participants, I planned for the interviews to take about 45 minutes. Factually, the interviews with the first group lasted around one hour, the ones with the second group around 50 minutes. Altogether, this led to 10 interviews in total, including 11 individuals, since one interview was conducted with two participants. All the interviews were held in person, because all the organizations and people were based in Berlin. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the interviews were often held at my home or at the participant's home – sometimes also in public places like a café or their workplace.

Owing to the very different backgrounds of the participants, the interviews were held in English as well as in German. In this thesis quotations have been translated into English by me. Where relevant, the original German phrasing is provided in footnotes or in parentheses to preserve the nuance of specific terms. For stylistic reasons, I decided to indent powerful quotes of the interviewees even when they are not longer than 40 words. Further, to enhance comprehensibility, I added the names of the respective interviewees when specifying the citation in case it was agreed to publish their names.

3.2. Interview Guideline

The interview guide was designed to cover the topics of the research questions but still allow flexibility in the conversation. A semi-structured format was chosen because it allowed the interviewees to take space and express their views freely without anticipating much from the questions. This flexibility was important as it encouraged participants to share personal experiences, which could lead to deeper insights. The questions were open-ended and focused on the three main themes - repression, coping with it and perceptions of the rule of law and democracy – which helped to elicit detailed responses rather than simple yes/no answers.

To create the interview guide, I started by introducing myself and my study. I informed the participants about the framework and how the answers would be used in the research process. I explained that nothing had to be answered and that the interview could be ended at any time. For the first questions, I chose an easier question and asked about the person's motivation and background. Then I started asking questions about repression and on dealing with them. The third main part of the interview was about the (changed) view of basic rights in the state, the perception of democracy and the influence of the German Staatsräson. At the end of the interview, the participants were able to say what they thought was important and so the interview ended with the words of the participants. I did not keep the interviews strictly according to the interview guide and tried, above all, to give space to the voices of those affected by

repression. If there were topics the interviewed person was talking about extensively, I ensured to give enough space to address their points. Depending on the course of the interviews, I followed the interview guide more or less closely, but I always made sure that the three main topics were discussed.

3.3. Data Analysis

For safety reasons and to ensure the anonymity of certain participants, not all interviews were audio recorded, or it was agreed not to publish the recordings and transcripts. The transcripts were created with the software “whisper”, as it is open source and the audio files do not have to be uploaded to a cloud and the transcription takes place locally, which is very important in terms of data protection. For the transcription, a simple Python script was created that automatically reads all audio files, recognizes the language, transcribes them and saves the transcript as a text file. This meant that the long transcription time of around 4-6 hours, depending on the length of the interview, could be avoided somewhat, as all interviews were run through automatically. After the transcription, all interviews were listened to again and the transcripts were improved to avoid small transcription errors. For the remaining not recorded interviews, notes were taken during the interview and used for the analysis.

In conducting the analysis, I followed the methodological principles of qualitative content analysis according to Philipp Mayring (2010). A structuring content analysis was employed, whereby relevant sections of the interview transcripts were systematically identified and extracted in accordance with predefined categories.

To code the collected data properly, the interviews were imported into MAXQDA where they were structured in addition to developing new codes. This coding led to a structuring into the following main categories:

1. Overt Repression
2. Covert Repression
3. Repression Changes Behavior
4. Solidarity as Protection
5. Repression endangers Democracy

These five categories were further subdivided into several subcategories. The (sub-)categories were formed by developing coding rules into which the interview sections and quotes can be categorized.

The following table is an example for the coding guide used in this thesis:

Table 1: Coding Guide

Main category	Sub-category	Definition	Example	Rule
1. Overt Repression	1.2. Institutional & Public Repression	Statements that describe forms of direct repression, that do not involve the police.	“At the beginning, Zalando’s management was very bold with this stuff. You put a watermelon; you’re going to get fired.”	A statement falls into the category “Institutional & Public Repression” if an individual or group experiences repression from other aggressors such as the police.
4. Solidarity as Protection	4.2. Community Support	Statements that describe forms of emotional or physical support for each other and the effects on individuals (excluding support from organizations). Individuals that realize “I am not alone”.	“There are so many wounds, and the only thing we can do is take care of each other. For me, for friends, for everything. We cook for each other. We get together and try to talk to each other. We comfort each other. We support each other’s work.”	A statement falls into the category “Community Support” if an individual experiences support from the movement (except support from organizations). Realization of not being alone with repression.
5. Repression endangers Democracy	5.2. German Staatsräson	Statements indicating that interlocutors talk about German Staatsräson.	“For me as a lawyer, Staatsräson does not exist.”	A statement falls into the category German Staatsräson, if an individual talks about German Staatsräson and it doesn’t fall into another category.

3.4. Limitations

This thesis is based on a qualitative research design with a limited sample size. As such, the findings cannot be considered representative of the pro-Palestinian movement in Berlin. Instead, they provide context-specific insights into individual and subjective experiences of repression and resistance.

Despite the carefully selected research design to find an answer to my research question, there are always limitations. One is the definition of terms. Certain terms such as “Staatsräson” or “democracy” etc. were not defined and can therefore be perceived differently by the interviewees. However, this is a problem that can generally occur in such open discussions. Furthermore, this openness helps to understand how the interviewees perceive and classify these terms.

Another limitation is the sample of the study. I could only conduct interviews with people who speak German or English, because these are the only two languages I can speak fluently. This limits the sample to specific language communities and may exclude perspectives expressed more comfortably in other languages. The period in which I could conduct the interviews was limited due to the framework conditions of the master thesis, as well as the fact that I could only include some aspects of the interviews and never the whole story. There is also a limitation because the case of my research is an ongoing process, which means that many aspects can change in a short amount of time and therefore cannot always be covered in the thesis. Generally, the ongoing genocide in Gaza, alongside the increasingly repressive political context in Germany, significantly influenced the conditions under which both research and activism were conducted during the investigation period. I had the impression that all the interviews conducted were very in-depth, and the participants felt comfortable to open up. Nevertheless, given the sensitivity of the subject and the power dynamics of the interview setting, it is possible that some of my interlocutors may not have felt able to speak freely.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

I don't have a lot of experience in this field, due to my previous master's and working as a data scientist. Therefore, it was very important to me to approach the data collection with sensitivity, especially because my master's thesis involves talking about very traumatic and sensitive topics. It was very important to me to ensure the safety of the participants and to create a safe space for them. I tried to achieve this through good planning, which is why I was in contact with several organizations at the very beginning of my data collection. It helped me understand the sensitivity of the topic and to sensitize myself about best ways to approach the field work.

Beside the safety reasons, it was very important for me to ensure that general ethical guidelines were taken care of. According to Misoch (2019, pp. 18-20), the ethical conduct and evaluation of qualitative

interviews should be guided by seven key principles, all of which I have sought to uphold: respect, the duty to inform, confidentiality, anonymity and data security, informed consent, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw, protection of personal rights, and the safeguarding of participants. That is why I talked to all participants about the content and aim of the research, as well as how the data will be used. I made sure the participants knew that they could end the interview or skip questions at any time and that they could also withdraw from the entire interview. Each person was free to choose whether to remain anonymous or to be named in the thesis. I made sure that the transcripts were anonymized if desired. I took some security measures when it came to data security, including deleting the audio files from my phone and keeping them in a protected folder. I transcribed the interviews locally on my laptop and did not upload them to any cloud.

As a white researcher working on a topic that is heavily influenced by colonialism, racism and oppression, I see it as crucial to critically reflect on my own position. My perspective is not neutral but shaped by my social status and privilege. I did not want to exoticize the Palestinian struggle but tried to approach my interlocutors with openness and respect. I do not want to solely talk about those affected, but rather open spaces in which their perspectives and experiences become visible. To do this, I constantly dealt with my own assumptions and biases and reflected on my positionality. I have taken part in many demonstrations on solidarity with Palestine, and I am aware of the actions taken by the authorities in these contexts. The participation on these and the critical engagement in this field shaped how I see the situation in Palestine. Nevertheless, in my role as a researcher it is necessary that I acknowledge my own point of view and do not interpret my beliefs into the findings because I want to see them there.

4. The Case

This chapter is intended to show that the events in Palestine, specifically since October 7th, 2023 but also before, are not a distant issue, but are directly linked to the pro-Palestinian movements and individuals and their repression here in Germany. With this chapter I intend to frame the situation in which my master's thesis is conducted. To show this dynamic, it is important to start not with October 7th but before.

To describe it here in a few lines can never do justice to the complex history of Palestine, but I would like to attempt a very simplified brief outline. In 1948, the first Nakba (the catastrophe) occurred, and 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes by Zionist militias and denied the right of return (Kilani & Pabst, 2022, p. 27). A year earlier, the United Nations decided to divide Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish part and shortly before that, in May 1948, the state of Israel and its independence were proclaimed. This turned a large part of the Palestinian population into refugees (p. 29). The progressive theft of land led the Palestinians to develop various concepts of resistance. In the war of aggression in 1967, Israel also conquered the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In order to promote dispossession and displacement, Israel uses a settlement policy in the West Bank that is maintained by a perfidious checkpoint system. It keeps the Gaza Strip militarily surrounded and under siege, which resembles an open-air prison, not to mention the evictions in East Jerusalem (pp. 30-31).

Matrix of control is defined by Halper (2022) as the interplay of mechanisms that enable Israel to control every aspect of Palestinian life. There are approximately 195 Jewish settlements in which 400,000 settlers live in the occupied territories. These settlements carve up the West Bank territories and disrupt the territorial integrity of Palestinian areas (pp. 60-61). Since the occupation of the territories, however, there have also been repeated instances of Palestinian resistance, the so-called "Intifada". The first Intifada took place from 1987 to 1990 and the Second from 2000 to around 2005 (Harman, 2022, p. 76). International observers such as Amnesty International describe the oppression prevailing there as apartheid. Amnesty says:

Amnesty has examined the security reasons cited by Israel and concludes that security concerns often serve as a pretext for measures intended to control the Palestinian population and exploit its resources. Israel keeps security-related information secret, which often means that individuals whose rights are violated in the name of security have no real opportunity to challenge these violations or obtain compensation. (Amnesty International Deutschland, 2022)

On October 7th, 2023, Hamas attacked Israel, killing 1,300 people (bpb, 2023) and triggering a military response from Israel. Within the last 22 months³, 61,158 people have been killed by the Israeli military

³ As of August 2025.

(Statista, n.d.). Since then, there has been a complete destruction of infrastructure and a blockade of aid supplies (Deutsche Welle, 2025).

Germany supports Israel with arms deliveries. This number increased after October 7th, 2023. By mid-May 2025, 485 million euros in arms exports had been approved by the German government. This means that Germany accounts for around 30 percent of arms deliveries to Israel. At the beginning of August 2025, the German federal government announced that there would be restrictions on arms deliveries to Israel (Tagesschau, n.d. a). However, it is not yet possible to say exactly what these will look like.

Since October 2023, there has been an extreme increase in pro-Palestine demonstrations in Germany. Especially in Berlin, where the largest European Palestinian diaspora lives, there have been many protests, mainly supported by migrant communities. Immediately after October 2023, there were extreme restrictions on demonstrations and Palestinian symbols (Thompson & Tuzcu, 2024, p. 5). The repression against the pro-Palestinian community is not a phenomenon that has only existed since October 7th, 2023. Even before that there were bans on demonstrations, e.g. 2022 and 2023 the ban on the Nakba demos in Berlin (Amnesty Deutschland, 2023) and the BDS resolution 2019 (Knight, 2019). However, the repression has become much stronger in terms of frequency and intensity since then. Every week you can see footage of immense police violence against pro-Palestine protesters.

To describe the situation in Germany it is important to mention that in Germany, there is also strong criticism of the pro-Palestine demonstrations from the left. People who feel as if they belong to this current are referred to as *anti-D*, short for anti-German. Other left-wing currents that criticize Israel's actions are referred to as Anti-Imp, for anti-imperialist. The anti-D formed with the reunification of Germany. They feared that this would lead to a war of annihilation against foreign ethnic groups. They demanded "Never again Germany" and a dissolution of the German people into a multicultural society. A second strand of the "anti-German" position lay in the horror of left-wing extremist indifference to Iraq's missile attacks on Israel. This led to support for military action by the USA and its allies against Iraq. Meanwhile, the anti-D segment is uncompromisingly in solidarity with Israel (van Hüllen, 2015).

Among the anti-D movements, Palestine solidarity is often defamed as antisemitic. Although this trend is becoming less common on the far left the current extent of this narrative and ideology has an influence on the media, politics and civil society. This attitude allows any criticism of Israeli politics or the state of Israel to be delegitimized as antisemitic.

The oppression in Palestine and the repression in Berlin are not separate phenomena. Both have their origins in geopolitical alliances, a political discourse that delegitimizes criticism of Israel's policies, and racist structures designed to silence migrant voices. This master's thesis, which deals with the repression of Palestine solidarity in Germany, should not even have to be written. The genocide against Palestinians, which has now been going on for 22 months, is what needs to be fought against and taken to the streets, not the repression that people receive for this resistance. Movements are forming against this injustice and these movements show that the fight for freedom and justice does not end at national borders.

For this master's thesis, I spoke to 11 people who take this injustice to the streets in Berlin despite all this repression, who are vocal about it and who do not allow Germany to remain silent about genocide. A lot of them welcomed me in their homes and we talked multiple hours on their balconies and on their kitchen tables about this injustice. These 11 people face the danger of becoming victims of brutal police violence at every demonstration, at every rally. Some people have lost family and friends and are grieving. These people are making use of their democratic rights and are being criminalized for it. Despite the struggle they face every day, despite all the injustice, I have felt an incredible strength in all of them. With every single person, I know that they will not give up fighting for justice.

The following chapter tries to make these people visible. It tries to give an insight-view of how people who are standing in solidarity with Palestine in Berlin experience and cope with their situation. It aims to make their voices visible, to decipher the manifestations of repression they experience, to dismantle the inhumane treatment of people who are fighting for the right cause.

5. Findings

The following chapter builds the core of this master's thesis, in which I summarize and describe my findings. In order to answer the research question(s), I present and classify the findings with references to the conceptual framework elaborated in chapter 2. This approach enables to highlight the particularities and dynamics of repression against pro-Palestine movements in Berlin.

The chapter is structured in five sections. The first two sections address the first sub-research question, presenting the various forms and dynamics of repression according to Earl's (2003) classification. Therefore, firstly, all forms of overt repression (multiple dimensions of police violence, institutional and public repression) are being presented and discussed. Secondly, all experiences of repression that are covert (psychological burden, impact on education, work and social life) are being analyzed. This division is fruitful to the analysis since it allows to make visible the different levels and areas of life that are affected by repression. Obviously not all forms of repression match only one of these categories, however, they are allocated by the question of whether it is a form of repression that can be easily observed or recognized by the general public (p. 48). The third and fourth sub-chapters elaborate on the second sub-research question by discussing the main findings on behavioral adaptations, coping strategies as well as solidarity and protection. The last sub-chapter "Repression endangers Democracy" discusses the third and fourth sub-research question and shows the impact of repression on democracy as well as the central role of German Staatsräson in the case of pro-Palestinian activism.

5.1. Overt Repression

The experiences of repression described by the interviewees cannot be broken down into individual forms but rather show a multi-layered construct of repression that works on different levels. It reinforces itself and interlocks, be it physical violence, legal, administrative, institutional or discursive repression. These multifaceted forms of repression create a climate of criminalization of Palestine solidarity in Berlin. This chapter deals with overt forms of repression: police repression on the one hand and public and institutional repression on the other. Police repression is categorized as overt since most forms of police repression is publicly visible, there is footage of it, and it can hardly be disputed. Earl (2003) refers to this as "observable coercion" (police violence, evictions) or "observable channeling" (symbol bans). Repression such as dehumanization and intimidation can occur both covert and overt. It is presented in this section, since the cases presented are mostly uncovered.

5.1.1. Multiple Dimensions of Police Repression

Every individual I interviewed, regardless of the initial reason for our contact, had either experienced or witnessed police repression due to their solidarity with Palestine. This form of repression emerged as a constant threat throughout all interviews. Police repression manifests itself in multiple forms such as physical violence, intimidation, disproportionate restrictions on demonstrations, systemic practices, and discursive justifications.

I was constantly going to protests and then obviously getting like pepper sprayed or like, you know, punched or stuff like that. And yeah, that was just kind of normal. Like I feel it's with everyone who's pro-Palestine. (Stella, Interview 7, 26.6.2025)

One prominent manifestation of police repression is the use of physical force, which can be observed every week at every Palestine related protest in Berlin. There is an enormous amount of footage of the police violently harassing and arresting protesters - no matter if they are children (Fleckenstein, 2024), pregnant or elderly (Pall ES ADU Palestine, 2025, p. 37). One person shared how they suffered a broken rib from repeated punches by the police during a protest. This occurred on March 8th, 2025, the International Women's Day. It's important to mention that during this feminist demonstration, not only physical violence as such but even numerous cases of sexual harassment and assault by police officers against flinta protesters were also reported (Daum, 2025).

Another interviewee was participating in a protest, organized by several pro-Palestinian organizations, on October 7th, 2024 – one year after the Hamas attack and the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Stella, whose quote introduced this chapter, was there, as they had been nearly every week since the year before. Next to them, a 14-year-old boy was thrown to the ground by police officers. The officers beat him with batons while his face was pressed against the curb. Stella reacted instinctively: They bent down and tried to hold the boy's head in their hands, trying to protect him from further injury. For this attempt of de-escalation, Stella themselves was violently arrested. During the arrest, Stella was beaten so severely that even more than half a year later, they still suffer from persistent pain in their shoulder and knee (Interview 7, 26.6.2025). This scene is not an isolated incident, but emblematic for the escalating police violence regularly directed at pro-Palestinian protesters in Berlin.

From a macro perspective, violence can be conceptualized as a form of repressive exercise of power. This theoretical framework can be empirically substantiated through numerous historical and contemporary cases (Earl, 2003, pp. 49-50; Buyse, 2018, pp. 5-6). Within the context under scrutiny, it is manifested as a predominant strategy of repression. It can be demonstrated that the extent, continuity and spatial and temporal omnipresence of this violence reach a level of intensity that is significantly different and therefore special compared to previously documented protest movements in Germany.

The aftermath of the scene described by Stella reveals, on top of the physical brutality, several forms of intimidation and dehumanization as well as deliberate degradation of Palestinian identity: After Stella was

arrested, they described what happened to them and the 14-year-old-boy in the cell. In the cell, after their personal information was recorded, Stella witnessed the officers register the boy's details. When he answered the question about his nationality with "Palestine", the officers laughed and said: "That's not a nationality." And they made him say that he is from Israel (Interview 7, 26.6.2025). These forms of intimidating and dehumanizing repression were described by many participants.

Another person I interviewed participates in almost every protest to document the repression carried out by the police. I asked them to describe situations that represent the behavior of the police towards the protestors:

They [the police] take this aspect of the dehumanization because I see how they treat Palestinians as non-human. I can never forget, it was in Kreuzberg and they took a pregnant woman by her wrists and ankles she was at seven months or something and they were carrying her away and the husband was following them, and he was saying: "Hey, this is my wife, she's super pregnant", and they couldn't care less they took her as a potato sack. (Mallard, Interview 5, 23.6.2025)

These dehumanization tactics are familiar patterns in repression. They serve to intimidate and deny the political subject. These are described several times in theory, for example by Butler (2004), who describes which groups are considered worthy of protection and if they are not considered worthy of protection, they are excluded from the system and acts of violence against them are more easily justified. Due to the strong increase in anti-Palestinian racism in Germany, especially since 2023, it has become even easier to legitimize this action by the police. Davenport (2007) also describes that if there is no fear of sanctions for this behavior, it is much more likely that the authorities will use coercion (p. 316).

Intimidating practices by the police were often described as entangled with surveilling measures: One person described that they were suddenly detained by the police on their way home and their ID was checked in the middle of the subway. When the person asked for the reason of their detention at that very moment, they were told that they had allegedly shouted a forbidden slogan ("from the river to the sea") at a demonstration two weeks ago (Interview 1, 21.4.2025). The slogan "from the river to the sea" was banned in Germany by the Federal Ministry in November 2023, as the slogan can be attributed to Hamas and its use is therefore automatically considered a sign of a terrorist organization (Tagesschau, n.d. b).

Melanie told me about a situation in which the intimidation entangled with surveilling measures of both groups and individuals, became very clear: Melanie was at a demonstration that was shut down by the police as people were speaking in Hebrew⁴. A replacement demonstration was quickly organized, and Melanie participated. It was a relatively small demonstration, counting around 20 participants, and took place in a fairly remote location. No matter the small number of participants, there were a lot of police officers present and around ten police vans. When Melanie went up to the police officers and said: "The organizers of the protest don't want this, can you please remove them [the police vans]. You could think

⁴ The Berlin police banned all languages except German and English, as otherwise it could not be guaranteed whether antisemitic or hateful statements would be made. In particular, this ban applied to Arabic, Hebrew and Gaelic (rbb24, 2025). In conclusion, the Berlin police does not manage to provide translators and prefer to ban languages.

they [the protesters] were criminals, the way the police are handling this.” The police officers just said: “Yes, yes, we’ll check it out” and in the end nothing was done. Melanie became a bit more insistent and spoke to the police again and asked them to remove these ten very present police vans, when another police officer came and said to Melanie: “Oh, you, I saw you with your dog here earlier at the other protest, I wanted to initiate misdemeanor proceedings against you because of the Animal Welfare Act, because your dog had its tail between its legs earlier” (Interview 2, 23.4.2025).

My dog is of course very important to me and they [the police] know that too, of course, it’s really shocking what different levels [of repression] are involved, also from a psychological point of view⁵. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

These two experiences make it very clear that the police are trying to intimidate the protesters by showing that the protesters are under surveillance. All actions of the activists are observed and can be used against them, regardless of whether they are justified. It is not forbidden to take your dog to a protest, but threats are made to have the dog taken away by inventing behavior to prevent the person from continuing to address the repression.

However, police repression extends far beyond physical violence, intimidation, dehumanization and surveilling measures. Many interviewees reported the frequent banning of demonstrations. Protests were sometimes not permitted at all, started far too late, or only went ahead under an overwhelming number of restrictions. Numerous demonstrations were forcibly and prematurely shut down⁶. Beyond the bans themselves, many participants described forms of linguistic and symbolic repression. Multiple people recounted that certain languages, such as Hebrew and Arabic, were banned, as well as specific phrases and slogans (Interview 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).

One interviewee mentioned that at a protest, protesters were explicitly forbidden from using the word “genocide”. The arbitrariness becomes even clearer when the interviewee described a moment during another demonstration when staff members walked through the crowd saying: “Can you pass it on and tell the people next to you that you’re not allowed to say, “Stopp den Mord, Stopp den Krieg?” because the police said so.” The person approached the organizer and said: “Can you please announce this publicly? It needs to be on record. People need to know that this kind of repression is happening. Can you please say it over the microphone?” The organizer replied: “Well, the police banned us from announcing this” (Interview 3, 29.4.2025).

In another case, a person was charged with a fine of 1,500 euros because of a sign. The sign read: “Have we learned nothing from the Holocaust?”. This slogan stands for coming to terms with German history and says that something so terrible must not happen again. In the context of the protest, however, this

⁵ Mein Hund ist mir natürlich total wichtig und das wissen die [die Polizei] natürlich auch, es ist schon krass, welche verschiedenen Ebenen da rangezogen werden, auch so psychologisch gesehen. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

⁶ It is also important to note that bans on demonstrations were already executed before October 2023, e.g. during the Nakba protests in Berlin in 2022 and 2023 (Amnesty Deutschland, 2023; Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025).

⁷ „Stop the murder, stop the war“ (own translation).

sign was interpreted as antisemitic, and the person was detained. The activist is accused of using this sign to “trivialize the industrial-scale murder of Nazi victims” (Rath, 2025). The case went to court, and the person was convicted (Interview 2, 23.4.2025). Noura Erakat's concept of lawfare describes how the law is not a neutral authority but rather a strategically deployed instrument of power, which becomes clear in this example. Political statements in the context of Palestine are only tolerated if they remain within certain narratives. Police repression was not only enacted through physical force and restrictive measures but also discursively legitimized. These violent measures are justified by invoking the need to preserve security or prevent antisemitism (Erakat, 2019, pp. 9-11).

These examples illustrate the arbitrary methods employed by the police, who is constantly attempting to prohibit speech and expression without sometimes even properly informing protesters. These tactics serve to retroactively legitimize police violence and arrests, while limiting the visibility and audibility of dissent. When it comes to legislation, things get complicated, because police officers can intervene in cases of suspected incitement to hatred or suspected glorification of terrorism – whenever there is a danger to general security. The police therefore have a great deal of freedom to impose conditions on protesters on the street and to arrest them. However, these conditions cannot be applied in general but are decisions that have to be made on a case-by-case basis for each protest and the general bans are constitutionally problematic (Wrase, 2023).

These forms of repression do not occur in a vacuum but are systemic in nature. The systemic dimension of repression combined with systematic anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian racism got especially visible within the last one and a half years while having a look at certain measures which immediately took action in Berlin after October 7th, 2023. Shortly after, migrant working-class districts like Berlin-Neukölln, were even more policed as usual and “practically occupied by police forces for several weeks to prevent protests with draconian measures...” (Thompson & Tuzcu, 2024, p. 5). Within the first weeks after October 7th, 2023 over 850 related arrests were documented and a special task force was created at the end of October 2023 “...with the purpose of advising police forces on cases ‘in connection with the Middle East⁸ conflict’” (Thompson & Tuzcu, 2024, p. 5). This tactic, to create a huge number of arrests and therefore legitimize even harder measures against certain groups, was commented by one of my interviewees while talking about his arrest as following:

They have a quorum of arrests at every demo to prove that this is a criminal crowd, and they can justify the repression. So, they don't care. Eventually your accusation will be dropped later. It's not their problem. But it's my problem that you handcuffed me in a way that my left hand, it's double sized than the right hand because it was so swollen. (Mallard, Interview 5, 23.6.2025)

⁸ The term "Middle East" is used here because of a direct quote. However, I refuse to use this term due to its colonial background (Yamahata, 2018).

There is no evidence that the police must meet a certain quorum of arrests, but the numbers of arrests and narratives of media coverage led to the criminalization and discreditation of Palestine solidarity as a whole⁹.

However, systemic criminalization of Palestine solidarity can also be observed prior to October 2023. Various trends have been evident since 2019, culminating in the anti-BDS resolution (Knight, 2019)¹⁰. The ELSC mentioned that in the wake of the demonstration bans in 2022 and 2023 clear racist narratives were involved since the bans referred to the emotionalized Palestinian diaspora to suggest that they are prone to violence. Such emotionalization is then associated with a propensity for violence, accusations of extremism, or proximity to terrorism, which in a post-9/11 context clearly reveals racist structures, especially anti-Muslim racism (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025). ReachOut, a counseling center for victims of racist and right-wing violence, stressed that racist police violence and arbitrary criminalization are not a new phenomenon. However, after October 7th, 2023 ReachOut experienced a very sharp increase in the number of consultations and repression. They observed a massive trend toward criminalization, especially at demonstrations, with police violence being used quickly and massively. For ELSC, the police violence clearly served the purpose of deterring people from participating in demonstrations. In other words, they are deprived of any right to demonstrate peacefully (Interview E3 ReachOut, 24.6.2025).

One of the most overt forms of repression is police repression, which affected all interviewees. Police repression includes police violence, but also arrests, surveillance, dehumanization and the targeted intimidation that accompanies the violence. In many interviews, it was clearly mentioned that racist police behavior could be observed in dealing with people in solidarity with Palestine. This chapter showed that the range of repression methods employed by the police against pro-Palestine movements in Berlin aligns with the repressive measures documented in extant research on repression (Buyse, 2018; Earl, 2003; Davenport, 2007). It could be shown that a known consequence of this repression – the criminalization of entire movements based on their suspected threat to security – is exactly what the interviewees showed. However, the intensity and frequency of the repression observed in Berlin since October 2023 are unprecedented in the local context.

⁹ There are a lot of articles about how many arrests there were at Palestine demos to show the enormous number of arrests. One article, for example, stated 48 criminal charges against 300 demonstrators, which creates an image of a highly criminal crowd (Röhrich et al., 2025).

¹⁰ According to ELSC, it was never about whether a person was a member of “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions” (BDS) or not, but rather about constructing a connection between BDS, antisemitism, and the strategy of boycotts itself. This means that BDS as a tactic was viewed very specifically within a German historical framework. The BDS movement is based on a long history of boycotts being used as a form of resistance against oppression. The assumption that this form of boycott is exclusively Palestinian leads to Palestinians being portrayed as a security threat. In the wake of this, there were already cases in which these BDS resolutions were not only used to exclude people from premises, uninvite them from lectures, or withdraw awards, but also to block accounts and expel politically active third-country nationals from Germany (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025). There was the case of Razmi Yaoudi in 2019 and Khaled Barakat, two politically active Palestinians who participated in events in Germany in 2019 and were then banned from political activity by the immigration authorities, who revoked their visas. In both cases, there was first a smear campaign in the media, but these decisions also repeatedly referred very clearly to their proximity to BDS (Jansen, 2020; Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025).

5.1.2. Institutional & Public Repression

In addition to the various forms of police violence, the range of repression also includes institutional and public repression. According to Earl (2003), the connection between statement and action in the following repressive measures is clearly recognizable to the public and is described as “observable channeling” (p. 48). This functioning of repression came up very often in my interviews. Therefore, in the following chapter, I would like to focus on the experiences of three interviewees and use their experiences to illustrate this nexus of overt repression. The actors of repression include employers, the media, political parties and the German state itself.

It was during the 2014 offensive that Ramsis’s father was killed by the Israeli army, as were five of his half-siblings, aged between four and twelve. The reaction that followed was devastating: The German government did not speak out or draw any political consequences, even though the murdered family members were German citizens. Ramsis says that he then took the step of denouncing the Israeli army with the help of a human rights organization (ECHR). However, the charges were not pursued further by the German chief public prosecutor because Israel was investigating the incident itself, and relevant records were kept confidential. In the end, Israel concluded that Israel was not guilty.

The prosecution was not pursued further by the German public prosecutor because Israel kept the files closed and investigated the case and concluded that Israel itself was not to blame. So, so to speak, the murderer of your family members investigated himself and said, um, yes, we did nothing wrong.¹¹ (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

However, Ramsis claims that it was acknowledged that there were indications of a war crime. The files are still blocked by Israel and cannot be accessed. The German state has both the responsibility and the means to exert pressure on Israel, to gain access to the relevant files, and to do everything within its power to investigate and clarify the murder of its own citizens (Interview 1, 21.4.2025). This case shows that the inactivity of the German state functions as a repression.

Ramsis experienced institutionalized repression on other levels as well. He was an active member of the Left Party in Berlin. Ramsis repeatedly attracted attention because of his stance on Palestine and his activism led to various smear campaigns in the *Tagesspiegel* and other newspapers, which were then used by the party as an opportunity to obtain an expulsion order against Ramsis (Interview 1, 21.4.2025). In the interviews, the issue of public smear campaigns, defamation on social media, and doxing emerged repeatedly. Those who express public solidarity with Palestine on social media often do not only face significant hate speech but also smear campaigns across mainstream media outlets. These forms of public

¹¹ Die Anklage wurde vom deutschen Staatsanwalt nicht weiterverfolgt, weil Israel die Akten für sich geschlossen hielt und den Fall untersucht habe und zum Schluss gekommen sei, Israel selbst sei nicht schuld gewesen. Also, sozusagen, der Mörder deiner Familienmitglieder hat sich selbst eben untersucht und gesagt, ähm ja, war richtig so. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

targeting frequently result in professional repercussions, social marginalization, and heightened psychological and security-related stress.

Another person was affected by precisely these smear campaigns because of her pro-Palestinian stance. Melanie is a political scientist and lawyer; she joined the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs relatively quickly after her state examination. She worked there as a consultant and was made a civil servant just six months later. Due to her online activism on Palestine, Melanie became the victim of a doxing campaign, to which the Bild newspaper responded by inquiring with her employer and writing a report about her (BILD.de, 2024). At no point was Melanie herself contacted. Following this article – which was subsequently reprimanded by the Press Council – Melanie was invited to an employee review (Interview 2, 23.4.2025). This is how she described it:

Because they always wanted to know from me whether I would continue to speak in the future. And you could read between the lines, if I don't say anything more in the future, then that's okay. But that's not negotiable for me. Firstly, because I'm in an active election campaign [for MERA 25]... I can't campaign and not say anything. And secondly, the things I have said are, in my opinion, unproblematic.¹² (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

During the meeting, she was told that if she stopped talking about Palestine in the future, she could keep her job. That option was unacceptable for her. At the same time, Melanie stood as a candidate for MERA25¹³ in the February 2025 German parliamentary elections. Considering that, it was even less of an option (Interview 2, 23.4.2025).

Melanie was invited to another employee review during her vacation, which took place on January 2nd, her first working day after her vacation. She received her notice of dismissal during the meeting and was effectively terminated on the same day (Interview 2, 23.4.2025), which she commented like this:

I said before that I really like working in the ministry, it's my dream job, that's exactly what I studied law for, and it was really important to me¹⁴. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

I haven't seen my office since the Bild article¹⁵. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

A recurring pattern in all the cases is the systematic intimidation by the authorities. The employer's statement to Melanie that if she does not speak out about Palestine from now on, she could keep her job, represents intimidation from the employer. Since these acts of intimidation do not occur in isolation, ELSC stated that it is extremely important to continue to encourage people not to be intimidated, no

¹² Weil sie immer von mir wissen wollten, ob ich jetzt in Zukunft noch weiterspreche. Und zwischen den Zeilen war halt auch zu lesen, also wenn ich jetzt dann in Zukunft nichts mehr sage, dann ist es auch okay so, mehr oder weniger. Aber für mich kommt das nicht in Frage. Zum einen, weil ich im aktiven Wahlkampf bin... Kann nicht Wahlkampf betreiben und nichts sagen. Und zum anderen sind die Dinge, die ich geäußert habe, nach meiner Auffassung, sind die unproblematisch. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

¹³ MERA25 is a German political party that is part of the pan-European party DiEM25.

¹⁴ Ich habe davor gesagt, dass ich sehr gerne im Ministerium arbeite, das ist mein Traumjob, das ist auch so, also das war genau das, wofür ich auch Jura studiert habe, und war mir auch total wichtig. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

¹⁵ Ich habe seit dem Bildartikel mein Büro nicht mehr gesehen. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

matter how severe the repression may be. These intimidation tactics lead to people censoring themselves completely and then no longer taking to the streets because they are worried that they might break some rule that has just been announced by the police as a new requirement. However, it is important to tell people that they have not done anything wrong or unjust, but that there is a system behind it (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025).

Another interviewee lost their job because of his solidarity with Palestine. Mohamad came to Germany in 2022 and started working for Zalando soon after. He described himself as average person and not as an activist. He has a good record, does his work as good as he can but is disconnected from other areas of the company. He believes that “work is for work” and prefers to keep it separate from his private life (Interview 6, 26.6.2025). It all started when Mohamad spoke out against the company’s board statement in support of Israel, which was very anti-Palestinian in many ways, as Mohamad claimed. Since he lost family members in the Lebanon war, he could not stay silent about the statement, and he got more vocal about this topic. Mohamad told me that he had been very active on social media (LinkedIn) and this online speech disturbed many people in the company. After speaking up against the company’s board statement, Mohamad was pressured to sign a mutually agreed resignation, which he didn’t do. He was then harassed, censured and isolated in the office, which was all very coordinated. After everything else failed on Zalando’s side, he was unilaterally terminated by the company in June 2024. Mohamad took this decision to court (Interview 6, 26.6.2025). It is fruitful to have a closer look in the proceedings of this case and how Mohamad observed shifting tactics from his employer:

At the beginning, Zalando’s management was very bold with this stuff. You put a watermelon [in your status on the company’s channel]; you’re going to get fired. (Mohamad, Interview 6, 26.6.2025)

Shortly after October 7th, 2023, Zalando’s management was very audacious when it came to the issue, but as the genocide progressed, they became more cautious in their approach. When Mohamad was dismissed, they said that his comment on the management board’s statement had nothing to do with his cancellation – even though he saw that this was made explicit in the letter to his lawyer. At the beginning, when the mutual dismissal was in the air, the comment on the management board was still given as the reason, 10 months and 30,000 Palestinians killed later, Zalando could no longer directly phrase it this way. Mohamad told me the following:

At the beginning, it was very bold. It was, do you support Hamas? It was, please change this LinkedIn. Towards the end, it’s like, it was this corporate shenanigan. Like, we remove you from meetings. We create an atmosphere where you’re uncomfortable. We pressure you to leave. We make up stuff about you. Like, this is something that I’ve witnessed for myself. (Mohamad, Interview 6, 26.6.2025)

In all the cases introduced in this chapter, it becomes obvious that anyone who speaks out loudly against the genocide in Gaza, especially on social media, faces repression such as being intimidated, dismissed and

marginalized by employers, state authorities and media outlets. Surveillance on social media continues to increase, and it is not only about silencing pro-Palestinian voices, but also about criminalizing them (Thompson & Tuzcu, 2024, p. 8). Another aspect which became clear in the interviews is that repression does not always have an active nature but can sometimes also be characterized through inactivity of institutions. In all three cases, the individuals were very vocal, especially on social media, which led to smear campaigns, especially in the case of Ramsis and Melanie, who were sometimes referred to directly and used to legitimize the act of repression. However, more subtle methods of repression were also used, such as being uninvited from meetings and isolation in the office.

5.2. Covert Repression

Not all forms of repression are immediately recognizable as such. For many of those affected, it is only in the course of reflection that more subtle forms, such as on the psychological level, are identified alongside more overt measures like police violence or arrests. The covert repression also include impact on work or social life, as according to Earl (2003) these forms of repression cannot be clearly traced or the connection documented. In many cases, it is not even recognized that the rejection is politically motivated and this is not clearly recognizable, especially for outsiders. According to Earl (2003), this belongs to the category of “unobserved channeling”. This chapter aims to illuminate the multiple and intersecting effects of experienced repression and how they affect the fabric of individuals’ everyday lives.

5.2.1. Psychological Burden

Psychological effects of repression manifest on various levels and can be overt if they are clearly recognizable by outsiders, e.g. like intimidation in the previous chapter (Earl, 2003). However, there are also invisible forms, i.e. covert psychological repression, which is not immediately recognizable and is difficult to prove (Earl, 2003). This section deals with this psychological repression. The psychological effects that became clear in my interviews are isolation, anxiety and insomnia.

The entire Palestine solidarity community is criminalized to such an extent that even people who are not yet affected by e.g. house raids or arrests, experience enormous fears that this could also happen to them. One person told me that many of their friends had been affected by house raids and that this had led to enormous psychological stress alongside with anxiety attacks. Mallard described the raids as following:

The police shows up at 5 a.m., they take your phone, so in that moment you are in their hands and they take all of your devices, your hard disk, USB, laptop, smartphone, and it's lost. You will not get it back. So it's financial damage, first of all. If it's a company laptop, they couldn't care less. (Mallard, Interview 5, 23.6.2025)

Mallard was afraid that this could happen to them too and could hardly sleep. As soon as some noise was heard in the building, the person thought that the next second the police would violently enter the apartment. For several months, the person could no longer sleep and was constantly under stress (Interview 5, 23.6.2025). The functioning of this form of repression can be deconstructed using Foucault's (1977) concept of the panopticon. Power is not only exercised through direct measures, such as police assaults, but through subtle psychological and social effects. Thus, it is not only physical violence that is present, but also a profound atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that acts as a form of "disciplining" on the subjects. The climate of fear thus has an enormous psychological impact on individuals, which, as described in chapter 5.3., can lead to self-censorship.

Mallard mentioned an important point when they referred to the general mental state of pro-Palestinian activists, which is already bad as one is watching a genocide live (Interview 5, 23.6.2025). Many people have family or friends in Palestine and endure immense emotional distress, witnessing their loved ones being killed, anxiously hoping that their families will survive. Even those without direct ties to Palestine are confronted daily with countless images and videos from Gaza, depicting immense suffering and relentless violence. In response, people raise their voices and take to the streets to raise awareness and call for an end to this injustice, only to become targets of repression themselves. This enormous double burden is important to mention.

We are in a permanent state of emotional war. It doesn't stop when you go to bed, it doesn't stop when you sleep. At the beginning of the genocide, I could hardly eat, I could hardly go to bed because the feelings of guilt were so intense. I thought about my family not being able to eat. Every time I took a sip of water, I thought about the dry throats of those in Gaza¹⁶. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

Ramsis, whose family was killed during the 2014 attack and whose uncles, aunts, and cousins still live in Gaza, described to me that for him this double burden is also to be seen in connection with the constant dehumanization which he experienced as a Palestinian being raised in Germany. There were periods where he was in therapy four times a week (Interview 1, 21.4.2025).

Another psychological burden mentioned by a lot of interviewees was their constant experience of being racialized – be it linked to the repression or not.

Of course, you're also afraid of being so politically isolated or being public enemy number one when smear campaigns against you go through the press. How do people on the street perceive me? Will I be able to find a normal job here again? So, in essence, this intense racist

¹⁶ Wir befinden uns in einem ständigen emotionalen Kriegszustand. Er hört nicht auf, wenn man ins Bett geht, er hört nicht auf, wenn man schläft. Zu Beginn des Völkermordes konnte ich kaum essen, ich konnte kaum ins Bett gehen, weil die Schuldgefühle so stark waren. Ich dachte an meine Familie, die nicht essen konnte. Jedes Mal, wenn ich einen Schluck Wasser nahm, dachte ich an die trockenen Kehlen der Menschen in Gaza. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

dehumanization that you go through as a Palestinian person all your life, of course it does something to you¹⁷. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

The experience of being racialized from the beginning of one's life in Germany was also stressed by another person I interviewed. The person stated that Palestinian people are never allowed to show their identity in Germany, as it is always immediately labeled as problematic and complicated. This starts as early as school, where children are forbidden from displaying symbols of their homeland and continues when they are asked to distance themselves from terrorism while walking their dog at 8 in the morning (Interview 4, 16.6.2025).

The perspective that Palestinians in Germany are not – or only at high costs – allowed to show their identity was also shared by the interview with ELSC. When Palestinians dare to express their claims or tell their story, it is repeatedly met with repression. ELSC therefore concludes that on top of the experienced physical violence against Palestinians the act of repression functions as a form of epistemic violence, as a form of erasure of Palestinian stories and experiences.

This chapter shows that anxiety and insomnia are caused by constant repression in the environment. The constant display of violence makes it a real threat even if it has not yet occurred. The incredible injustice, which is made even clearer by the double burden of criminalizing people who oppose genocide, can lead to severe hopelessness. An important point is the racism that Palestinians experience throughout their lives, which leads to an intensification of repression. Palestinians are affected by these effects of repression on several levels. It is not only about repression due to other opinions or racism, but Palestinians are also affected by repression because they suffer and grieve.

5.2.2. Impact on Education, Work & Social Life

The influence of repression on various areas of life is not always clearly recognizable as repression for outsiders, and yet it is repression that people must deal with. Therefore, according to Earl (2003), these types of repression also fall into the category of covert repression. In addition to the immense psychological burden, the various forms of repression also show tangible effects on people's everyday lives: on their educational, professional and private lives.

As mentioned in chapter 5.1.2. Institutional & Public Repression, Ramsis's activism and his vocality on the issue led to his expulsion from the Left Party. Mohamad, who was fired from Zalando because of his solidarity with Palestine, said of himself: "I never wanted to become an activist, I was forced into it by this injustice" (Interview 6, 26.6.2025). Everyone uses their free time to take action against the ongoing

¹⁷Natürlich hat man auch Angst, politisch so isoliert zu sein oder public enemy number one zu sein, wenn so Hetzkampagnen gegen einen durch die Presse gehen. Wie nehmen mich Leute auf der Straße wahr? Werde ich hier wieder einen normalen Job finden können? Also, im Kern diese heftige rassistische Entmenschlichung, die man als palästinensische Person so ein ganzes Leben lang durchmacht, die macht natürlich was mit dir. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

injustice and as a result, not even their private lives are spared from suffering. Stella told me that their political stance as “I’m not affiliated with Zionism” had several severe consequences in their private and professional life. Firstly, through this political stance they lost a lot of friends. Secondly, in the music scene this political stance led to numerous withdrawals of performances by music productions and promoters (Interview 7, 26.6.2025).

Another interviewee told me that they have extreme problems in their professional life because of their political views when it comes to Palestine. Because of their CV, which shows that they have mainly worked in Palestine-related projects, they had no success finding a job in Germany. They said: “I have worked once in Germany, it was for an Arab initiative led by a Palestinian. Otherwise, I only worked remotely in the USA” (Interview 4, 16.6.2025).

One very well-known case exemplifies what impact Palestine solidarity has on one’s professional life. In early 2024, City Councillor Max Kindler (CDU) unilaterally terminated the contract of “FRIEDA e.V.” - an association for intersectional, queer feminist services. The girls’ and women’s centers in Berlin's Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain district are a central point of contact for migrant girls in particular. As justification for the termination of the contract it was mentioned that individual employees had participated in pro-Palestinian demonstrations, and that one former staff member, who left the organization as a result of the dispute, had made “antisemitic and anti-Zionist statements against Israel” on social media (Rojas Kienzle, 2024).

Hanno Hauenstein, who is a freelance journalist who writes extensively about the genocide in Gaza as well as about repression here in Germany, confirmed that also for him there are impacts on his professional life. Hanno says that it has become more difficult to write about Palestine in Germany. He has been censored, an interview he gave was never published, and certain media outlets no longer respond to his proposals. To him, it feels like a systematic approach rather than a coincidence. Hanno has been writing about this topic for the last year and a half with a very clear stance. Hanno’s stance is not particularly radical, but he clearly speaks out against occupation, apartheid, and genocide. However, that is enough to prevent him from getting assignments from many media companies (Interview E2 Hanno, 22.5.2025).

The interview with ReachOut highlights another important nexus of effects of repression on professional life. They addressed that organizations themselves can also be victims of repression: You publish something about anti-Palestinian racism or provide counseling on the subject, you are scrutinized very closely and have to explain in detail to the funders, the Berlin Senate, why you did so and how you did it. This fact affects the trust of people to ask for counseling and support – which, due to experienced anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim racism, they would most of the times not dare to ask for an “official institution”. The atmosphere of extreme scrutiny makes it therefore difficult for affected organizations to keep their status and fundings on the one hand and to do their utterly important work and trust-building on the other hand (Interview E3 ReachOut, 24.6.2025).

5.3. Behavioral Adaptations and Coping Strategies

The repressive climate and the criminalization of solidarity with Palestine compel individuals to alter their everyday behavior out of fear. This extends beyond shifts in public appearance and conduct, encompassing a broader transformation of protest practices themselves. This chapter adds to chapter 5.2.1. Psychological Burden, examining how the environment of fear leads to changes in appearance and behavior. According to Ahmed (2004), the emotion which leads to restriction is not anxiety but fear, as there is a concrete source of the threat. Due to the repression described in the previous chapters, these forms of repression are visible in oneself or in the environment. Anxiety, on the other hand, would be when the threat is not identifiable (pp. 64-65).

5.3.1. Adaptation of Behavior

I don't reveal that I'm politically active to my neighbors. I do sense a serious threat. My friends have experienced serious threats. My friends have been beaten up on the street. My friends post boxes have been vandalized by neighbors continuously. So, they moved out to a different place. They don't know who did it. Um, they [my friends] are Arab. There is a lot of violence that could happen. So, I think one repression is just to know that this could happen to you. Around my house, I hide it [my Kufiya] and then when I'm supposedly far away from my house I put it on. That's just my daily life. (Interview 3, 29.4.2025)

The situation described by this interviewee to change one's behavior due to fear of further repression was widely shared. One of the interviewees told me that, due to the sheer omnipresence of police violence and intimidation, „I never feel safe. And that's really it. I always look over my shoulder". They feel constantly uncertain about who or what to tell and are afraid of being followed by “undercover police officers or Zionist press”. Their everyday behavior is adapted, for example by changing the route when going home alone or not getting off at their stop but a different. Mallard added that these measures of adapting behavior are important to them since there is no protection from the police. Nobody is supervising the activity of the authorities in Germany. There is not one a civil subject that is capable of opening an independent investigation on whether they are working legally or not (Interview 5, 23.6.2025). Both, fear and adaption of behavior, appear more than justified, as there are so many examples where exactly this kind of repression has happened.

5.3.2. Change in Public Appearance

Sometimes I don't wear the Kufiya because I don't want to antagonize people. So, sometimes it's also about self-censoring. And I know that it's going to happen [to antagonize people]. So when they manage to make you remove a sign of solidarity with the people under genocide, then they already managed to censor you in the end. (Mallard, Interview 5, 23.6.2025)

For many people I spoke to, a change in public behavior was described due to the repression that is present and noticeable everywhere, especially when it comes to specific symbols, a fear was described that is present when the symbols are worn visibly. The Kufiya was often mentioned as no longer being worn in public.

One interviewee told me that they used to wear the Kufiya regularly, almost every day. Even before October 2023, the person described attacks on their person due to wearing the Kufiya. Since they suffer from an illness and an assault, such as being pushed, can already lead to major consequences: They have been forced to stop wearing the Kufiya since October 7th, 2023, as the risk of an assault and the associated physical consequences are too high (Interview 4, 16.6.2025).

When I'm in Italy I wear my Kufiya or I wear a pro-Palestine t-shirt. When I'm in Berlin I only do that when I feel like taking all the consequences which come with it. When I get a proposal for whatever social activity, I'm very suspicious. I start going on the social media of the bar where they invite me to see if they ever shared anything about Gaza or if they are anti-Deutsch or supporting Zionism. (Mallard, Interview 5, 23.6.2025)

For most of the people interviewed, everyday life has changed dramatically due to the daily repression they face, if not in themselves then in their immediate surroundings. In addition to how public appearances have changed, the fear of unsafe spaces and groups, including left-wing ones, has also changed. In Germany, there are so-called “anti-Deutsch” groups (see chapter 4) in the left-wing movements, which are strongly supporting Israel and are Zionist in character (van Hüllen, 2015). There are anti-Deutsch groups in Berlin, especially in the cultural and club sector. For many Arab or Muslim people, these places are not safe. Another person told me that it is not possible for them to trust anymore – not in the authorities, not in institutions, not in the people but also not in leftish spaces and so-called leftish German friends (Interview 3, 29.4.2025).

The deep erosion of trust, repeatedly mentioned in the interviews, can be traced back to the fact that the Palestine solidarity community, particularly in Germany, is generally not perceived as “worthy of protection”. When activists continuously experience themselves or their communities being disproportionately monitored, harassed, or subjected to violence at demonstrations, while other groups are allowed to protest peacefully, this does not foster a sense of equality or safety, but rather one of exclusion and danger. In such a context, trust cannot develop, instead, it is further undermined with each new experience of repression (Butler, 2009).

Despite the (self-)censoring happening in public spaces and appearance, another phenomenon is rising. Due to the intensification of repression since October 2023, a wave of solidarity can be observed and that more people on Berlin's streets are wearing symbols that are pro-Palestinian. One person I spoke to told me that with increasing repression and violence, they wear the Kufiya and other symbols more often in public, because as a white person, they are less affected by repression, and it contributes to a normalization of wearing these symbols in public. The probability that they will be punished is lower than

their nonwhite friends'. I also talked to people who said: "With every intensity of repression I will go on the streets even more" (Interview 7, 26.6.2025).

5.3.3. Transformation of Protest Practices

Many people report feeling intimidated to participate in demonstrations. The repressive and violent atmosphere deliberately created by the police at protests serves as a deterrent for many. At every demonstration, there is a tangible risk of physical assault and violent arrest. As a result, one must be physically and mentally prepared to expose oneself to such danger. Despite this climate, many individuals stated that they continue to attend demonstrations almost every week and consciously refuse to be intimidated. A crucial factor in this resilience is the sense of community. This topic will be explored in more detail in the following chapter 5.4. Solidarity as Protection.

Stella told me that they were punched in the face by the police, but compared to what happened to other demonstration participants, it is nothing serious that could intimidate them to stop going to protests. What happened to Stella and their reaction clearly shows that the level of violence is so high that being punched in the face is downplayed and, for many, a risk they are willing to take to protest against genocide (Interview 7, 26.6.2025). Everyone in this person's immediate environment has already become a victim of police violence and this was the case for most of my participants. A striking and consistent theme throughout the interviews is the minimization of that violence: On one hand, a common response among survivors of violence, and on the other, a reflection of how normalized these practices have become. It points again to a system of repression that is not incidental, but systemic.

However, there are also people who can no longer justify going to demonstrations because of this level of violence. The person from interview 4 suffers from a chronic illness and is therefore no longer able to exercise their right to demonstrate, as this violence means that Palestine Solidarity demonstrations are not a safe space for all people and especially for people with illnesses (Interview 4, 16.6.2025). They described the situation as following:

I used to go to a lot of demos. I haven't been once since [October 2023] simply because I have such attacks of pain [due to my chronic illness] and because I know that no police officer would even care if I collapsed there. That's not a space I can go to. Also, because in Berlin it's no longer possible to predict how the protest will turn out. It's quite clear that with these special conditions, so to speak, it's no longer an accessible space for me¹⁸. (Interview 4, 16.6.2025)

¹⁸ Ich war früher viel auf Demos. Ich bin seitdem [Oktober 2023] kein einziges Mal gewesen einfach, weil ich [durch meine chronische Krankheit] solche Schmerzanfälle habe und weil ich weiß, es würde keine Polizisten auch nur irgendwie interessieren, wenn ich da umkippe. Das ist kein für mich begehbarer Raum. Also auch weil in Berlin nicht mehr einschätzbar ist, welche Demo wie wird. Das ist einfach ganz klar, es ist mit sozusagen diesen Sonderkonditionen für mich kein Raum mehr der zugänglich ist. (Interview 4, 16.6.2025)

Stella told me about people in their environment who were choked by the police, so severely that they had to go to the hospital. These friends needed time before they could go to demonstrations again and therefore were forced to sit out a few weeks (Interview 7, 26.6.2025).

This chapter showed the effects of the existing repression on the behavior of the people concerned. One pattern that can be recognized is that activists affected by the constant repression feel that they are constantly being watched and consequently cannot trust anyone. As with Foucault's (1977) concept of the panopticon, it becomes clear that this constant threat of surveillance leads to self-censoring: People begin to stop wearing symbols such as the Kufiya or only wear them under certain conditions. Sara Ahmed (2004) notes that potential fear of future harm causes people to censor themselves in the here and now (p. 65). Pro-Palestinian protests themselves become too dangerous due to violent police repression and are no longer a safe place for most people. Ahmed (2004) writes that fear changes the lived space, as it restricts routines, and certain symbols are no longer worn or certain spaces are avoided (pp. 69-70). On the other hand, it can be observed that the totality of the repression has made it even more important for many activists to oppose the repression regardless of the consequences, be it by wearing symbols or attending protests. The following chapter will follow up on this thought by outlining in more detail how communities deal with experiences of repression.

5.4. Solidarity as Protection

Communities play a central role in dealing with repression. While some support networks and organizations were already existing before October 2023 (e.g. ELSC, ReachOut, KOP¹⁹), others emerged spontaneously in response to increasing repression (e.g. 3EZWA²⁰). They offer not only protection, but also collective self-empowerment. In addition to the many organizations mentioned, most of the people I interviewed stated that being organized and the community provide the strongest support. In the first part of this chapter, it is outlined how these organizations provide support whilst being restricted themselves. The second part of this chapter shows how community structures help repressed people to not feel isolated and how they cope with repression.

5.4.1. Organized Support Structures

Most interviewees mentioned the same organizations that supported them or were recommended to them. These organizations support on a legal but also on an emotional level. However, supporting organizations

¹⁹ KOP short for „Kampagne für Opfer rassistischer Polizeigewalt“ (english: Campaign for victims of racist police violence). KOP deals, „with the police practice of racial profiling, the documentation and investigation of racist police attacks and assaults, as well as providing support to victims and referring them to counseling centers“ (KOP Berlin, n.d.).

²⁰ 3ezwa is an association which „provides financial and legal support to those facing repression for their commitment to the Palestinian cause“ (3EZWA, n.d.).

are also affected by repression and are extremely overwhelmed with the number of cases they are dealing with. Supporting organizations, regardless of whether they have been around for a long time or had to be set up very quickly as a reaction to certain repression, are always also spaces of political defense and, above all, spaces of survival and self-definition (Hill Collins, 2000, pp. 100-102).

Legal support organizations like 3EZWA were founded in response to the repression because not enough organizations willing to support individuals who are in solidarity with Palestine could be found in Berlin.

That's why 3EZWA was formed here, which specializes in anti-Palestinian repression. And yes, overall, it's just that many new structures have formed out of necessity and need. And I would say that a lot of that remains. Even now that the movement has flattened out a bit²¹. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

The ELSC – as an example for one of these supporting organizations – described to me various forms of restrictions they face. One of its core actions is to support people who are on trial due to their actions in solidarity with Palestine. Normally, trials are mostly open to the public and there is a right to take notes, i.e. with paper and pen. ELSC reported that over the last few years these trials have been increasingly restricted. This also means, of course, that supporting organizations' access to this information and to what happens in court is becoming increasingly restricted (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025). ELSC described it as following:

We [ELSC] have already seen cases where translators and interpreters have not turned up, thus delaying the proceedings further. Judges who don't want to make a decision, who don't want to admit further evidence, etc. Or we also see the intensification, the restriction of publicity, especially in court²². (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025)

Due to capacity constraints, the ELSC is currently mainly responding to repression, but it is trying to not only react but to also to actively pursue strategic litigation. This means challenging unjust legal proceedings to delegitimize them as soon as they arise. Another form of support is to create and offer a database to report incidents of repression. The publication and analysis of the database shows that repression is systematic, which means that people do not feel that they themselves have done something wrong. This is of a great help since often people think that this repression would not happen if they had not said the wrong thing – a major isolating effect of repression which, in this way, can be challenged (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025). ReachOut – the other supporting organization I interviewed – stated that one focus of counseling is always to identify institutional racism. Since racism is not a private problem but

²¹ Deshalb wurde hier die 3EZWA gegründet, die sich auf antipalästinensische Repressionen spezialisiert hat. Und ja, insgesamt ist es so, dass sich viele neue Strukturen aus der Not herausgebildet haben. Und ich würde sagen, dass vieles davon bestehenbleibt. Auch jetzt, wo die Bewegung etwas abgeflacht ist. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

²² Wir [ELSC] haben schon Fälle mitbekommen, wo Übersetzer, DolmetscherInnen nicht aufgetaucht sind und so das Verfahren weiter hinausgezögert wurde. RichterInnen, die keine Entscheidung fällen wollen, die keine weiteren Beweise zulassen wollen, etc. Oder wir sehen auch vor allem vor Gericht die Intensivierung, das Beschränken der Öffentlichkeit. (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025)

structurally and institutionally entrenched, it must be documented. It is of extreme importance to them to make clear that these are not isolated cases, that it happens all the time, that it is structural, and that people who face this repression are not to blame for what is happening to them (Interview E3 ReachOut, 24.6.2025).

The importance of the supporting organizations' work became clear in the interview with Stella. When Stella was arrested, they were recommended the same three organizations by various friends, and they were of great help to her. Stella did not grow up in Germany and is not familiar with the German legal system. Especially in their situation, such a charge is extremely overwhelming if you must deal with it alone. Stella got information and reported that they were taken very seriously, even though there are so many arrests and charges. Nevertheless, they got a lot of support from these organizations and felt trust and understanding for how scary it is not coming from this place and going through something like that (Interview 7, 26.6.2025).

In the interview with ReachOut it became clear that people who experience repression because of their pro-Palestinian stance often arrive at the counseling center with a very hopeless view of the rule of law. They often have no trust that anything can be done about it through legal channels, and often these people have already filed several complaints. ReachOut's approach is to always say that filing a complaint does not bring justice, but it disrupts the system and forces the police and authorities to deal with those affected as victims. When complaints are filed against the police, it is not necessarily the case that the police officers will actually be punished and suspended, because that very rarely happens, but it is a strategy to force the police officers to justify what they have done. ReachOut stated that it is important that the victims document their perspective on the situation in writing, that the police and the authorities are forced to deal with this case from this perspective, that the police officers must spend their working hours on this and not spend their working hours criminalizing the victims themselves. For ReachOut it's a strategy which symbolizes:

We're not going to make it easy for you. It's not acceptable. You cannot disenfranchise these people, and you must also deal with it from the perpetrator's perspective, and we are vehement and will stay on top of it and not leave you alone²³. (Interview E3 ReachOut, 24.6.2025)

Through this chapter it became evident that supporting organizations such as ELSC, ReachOut and 3EZWA in addition to their provision of support in legal matters, also exert a significant influence on how those affected by repression perceive themselves within the designated space and how they cope with repression. These organizations serve to demonstrate that individuals impacted by repression are not isolated and are not culpable of any transgressions. In this manner, they also assist affected individuals in

²³ Wir machen es euch nicht bequem. Es geht nicht. Ihr dürft diese Menschen nicht entrechten und ihr müsst euch auch aus Täterperspektive damit auseinandersetzen und wir sind vehement und bleiben da dran und lassen euch nicht in Ruhe. (Interview E3 ReachOut, 24.6.2025)

coping by alleviating feelings of isolation. Nevertheless, all these organizations themselves struggle with the vast number of cases and the obstacles they have to master while doing their work.

5.4.2. Community Support

In addition to the organizations that provide support, a large Palestine solidarity community has formed in Berlin. These communities are of enormous importance as they are an engine of resistance and continuation. As Angela Davis (2016) stated “It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism”, as a response to the question of what keeps them fighting (p. 58).

One person stressed on how important the support of the community is for them. A lot of the social support comes from the community. The forms are often decentralized: A lot of community support, mutual aid, solidarity with each other, building a community and caring within a community. These are such important measures that are all organized within the communities themselves, but the person stated that it is not enough since there is so much violence that comes from the authorities (Interview 3, 29.4.2025).

There are so many wounds, and the only thing we can do is take care of each other. For me, for friends, for everything. We cook for each other. We get together and try to talk to each other. We comfort each other. We support each other’s work. (Interview 3, 29.4.2025)

Especially for people who have not lived in Berlin for long or were not as organized, the existing repression can have an extremely deterrent effect. It leads to isolation, because you don’t know whom you can trust. That’s exactly what is wanted, that people act in isolation and feel alone and powerless. Mallard told me that after an extreme phase of isolation, they managed to go to community building events more often, to connect and that it helped them enormously: “When you are with comrades, who also received letters from the police and are in the same situation, you kind of socialize your struggle and everything is more doable. Because you are together. The strength is coming from community” (Interview 5, 23.6.2025).

For most people I spoke to, the support and the realization that they were not alone in this gave them a lot of strength to carry on. The understanding that “I didn’t do anything wrong” but that it is a systemic problem and there is a criminalization of the entire Palestine cause helped them (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025). Ramsis summarized it as follows:

Fortunately, I was organized, I had established a stable network in the Palestine solidarity movement. Of course, I had all the contacts, that’s the be-all and end-all. So, if you have to experience something like that in isolation, it totally demoralizes you and destroys you. But if you

face it collectively and are able to classify it politically, then you can move on immediately and that's exactly what I did²⁴. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

Mohamad was severely isolated and bullied at work when he worked for Zalando and spoke out in favor of Palestine. He had the feeling that he was alone in this situation and that this was an individual case that only affected him. The interesting thing is that he realized afterwards that it was the same for almost everyone who was discriminated by Zalando. When Mohamad's case went to court²⁵, many people suddenly came forward asking what had happened to him, why he had left. This wave of solidarity led to a joint investigation and an exposing of Zalando, where now more and more details of the repression that Zalando exercised on their employees who spoke out for Palestine are revealed. A lot of evidence was collected showing that what happened to Mohamad happened to many people at Zalando. He said: "Mine has by no means been the worst case" (Interview 6, 26.6.2025).

Many people were also surprised about how strong solidarity in the community is. Melanie, who was dismissed from her position at the ministry from one day to the next, said that friends of hers had organized a crowdfund to cover the legal costs. Melanie shared her story publicly relatively early and stated that she would take legal action. Not only was Melanie dismissed and no longer received a salary, but she is also facing ongoing legal proceedings that cost thousands of euros. Within a few days, several thousand euros were raised through crowdfunding and many people who were complete strangers to Melanie spoke well of her and said that it was about the rights of all of us. These acts of solidarity show that what happened to Melanie is a violation of basic rights and a constant perpetuation of censorship and repression that affects and is being shared by the entire community (Interview 2, 23.4.2025).

During the interviews, it was noticeable that some people found it problematic or felt ashamed to rely on communities' resources. It was mentioned repeatedly that they did not want to burden the community with their emotions and excessive demands and that they did not want to place an even greater financial burden on the community and organizations because they were afraid that the community has already a lot to deal with. Mallard described this feeling as follows:

Personally, I didn't take all the chances that I had to cope with. There's a good system. There are some groups for mental coaching and counseling. I don't know why I felt like staying alone. In the end, this was a mistake. I was just coping on my own. And the only moment when I felt okay, it was the rally. So, I was just waiting for the next rally. This was my therapy, like yelling even stronger than before and showing up even more than before to prove that I was unbreakable, that they could not break me. (Mallard, Interview 5, 23.6.2025)

²⁴ Ich war zum Glück organisiert, ich hatte ein stabiles Netzwerk in der palästinasolidarischen Szene gesetzt. Da hatte man natürlich die ganzen Kontakte, das ist das A und O. Also, wenn du vereinzelt und isoliert sowas erleben musst, das demoralisiert dich natürlich total und macht dich kaputt. Aber wenn du kollektiv dem begegnest und das auch politisch einordnen kannst, dann kannst du sofort weitermachen und genau so hab ich das gemacht. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

²⁵ Mohamad won the court case in the end. However, there is no more precise information on the outcome.

This quote demonstrates that, despite some individuals' hesitancy to utilize certain forms of support systems, participating in a demonstration and being surrounded by people who are in solidarity with Palestine was existential in preventing feelings of complete isolation and helplessness. The notion, as Angela Davis (2016) asserts it, that the community is of fundamental importance for survival and progression is one that is echoed by the interlocutors of this study. Community stands in direct opposition to the neoliberal concept of individualism (p. 58). Repression tries to target individuals as they are easier to break in isolation, but it is not as easy to break a whole movement.

5.5. Repression endangers Democracy

Repression of Palestine solidarity activism raises key questions about democracy and the rule of law in Germany. The voices that are heard and those that are marginalized are shaped by public opinion and media coverage. The criminalizing portrayal, which is one-sided, engenders a climate in which dissenting positions are delegitimized. However, due to security-discourses and the deeply rooted doctrine of German Staatsräson (see chapter 2.4.), solidarity with Palestine is subject to limitations in Germany and Berlin. For a considerable number of those affected, democracy thus, appears less as an inclusive space and more as an order that is limited by exclusion and restriction of fundamental rights.

5.5.1. German Staatsräson

This chapter aims to show the impact of German Staatsräson on repression against pro-Palestine activism in Berlin. Through the interviews it became clear that the role of this overarching – yet extra-legal – principal must be stressed when it comes to understanding the diverse forms of repression in Germany, especially in Berlin.

Since Angela Merkel's statement in 2008 that "Israel's security is part of Germany's Staatsräson", the principle of German Staatsräson has become firmly established in Germany's political and media landscape. It functions not only as a foreign policy commitment, but increasingly as a domestic policy dogma (Fekete, 2024, pp. 101-103). What is referred to as Staatsräson has developed in recent years into a normative structure that can severely restrict democratic rights and lead to actions, such as deportation and expulsion from university, as soon as solidarity with Palestine is articulated.

For me as a lawyer, Staatsräson does not exist. It is not a legal term. We lawyers are guided by laws and the constitution. International law is at the top of the list – European law... and then comes German law. And nowhere else is there such a thing as the concept of Staatsräson²⁶. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

²⁶ Für mich als Juristin ist "Staatsräson" nicht existent. Das ist kein juristischer Begriff. Wir Juristen orientieren uns an Gesetzen und an der Verfassung. Eigentlich ist das internationale Recht das, was ganz oben steht, das Europarecht. Und dann kommt das deutsche Recht. Und nirgends da gibt es so was, das Konzept der Staatsräson. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

Melanie, who is a lawyer and used to work for a governmental institution, confirmed that the principle of Staatsräson does not exist in the German law. She argued that the Staatsräson as a system has nothing to do with a democratic system based on the rule of law. She stated that this term may be meant to be politically groundbreaking, but the term is heavily instrumentalized, along with everything associated with it. The Staatsräson is absolutely exploited to push through this repression and this policy with a “sledgehammer” (Interview 2, 23.4.2025).

One example of the interview with Melanie shows that the formally extra-legal principle of Staatsräson indeed has severe legal effects. Melanie stated that as a lawyer and human being she cannot support the criminal prosecution of people who use the phrase “from the river to the sea” when it comes from a Palestinian context. She said:

The country is occupied in violation of international law, and there is no need to argue about that; these are facts. Palestinians are not allowed to say that they want to be free, but on the other hand, when it comes from the Israeli perspective and they say, “from the river to the sea, this is the only flag you will see”, which is a real threat because genocide is currently taking place, that is not prosecuted²⁷. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

This double standard, this injustice, is clearly discriminatory treatment with racist roots – one effect of the Staatsräson (Interview 2, 23.4.2025).

Staatsräson is not a legal principle, but it is applied legally, for example, in the Berlin Senate’s decisions against Berlin IV in three of the four cases (Rojas Kienzle, Ohne Urteil: Vier Aktivisten werden wegen Staatsräson ausgewiesen, 2025; Hauenstein, 2025), which referred to German Staatsräson to argue that three active individuals endangered the security and order of Germany (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025).

Another interlocutor I spoke to mentioned another nexus of Staatsräson as a legitimization of extra-legal measures: The police has banned languages such as Arabic, Hebrew, and Irish on demonstrations, and arrested people for speaking these. People’s homes have been raided because of Instagram posts. Suddenly, it became illegal to say “genocide,” and people were arrested for doing so. When all these types of repression were happening, no politician in Germany said that this is illegal. People have been arrested for arbitrary statements, and it does not matter whether what is happening is legal or not, because the current state of Germany justifies these additional legal or illegal measures for the benefit of the state (Interview 3, 29.4.2025). They summarize what was legitimized as repression in the name of Staatsräson by the German state and expresses that there was no outcry from any side when these measures were implemented.

²⁷ Das Land ist völkerrechtswidrig besetzt ist und darüber brauchen wir nicht streiten, das sind Fakten. Dass die Palästinenser nicht sagen dürfen, dass sie frei sein wollen, aber andersrum, wenn es aus israelischer Lage kommt und die dann sagen, from the river to the sea, this is the only flag you will see, was ja eine wirkliche Bedrohung darstellt, weil es halt momentan genau so stattfindet, dass das dann nicht verfolgt wird. (Melanie, Interview 2, 23.4.2025)

Within the notion of Staatsräson reforms with the aim of silencing Pro-Palestinian voices can be observed in many sectors. One prominent example was mentioned by the ELSC: On March 26th, 2024, a reform of the Higher Education Act was implemented in Berlin. As a result, students can be expelled from university due to their acts of solidarity with Palestine (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025).

According to Al-Taher (2024, pp. 253-254) the German Staatsräson is not an abstract state formula, but a powerful instrument of political selection. It decides who is allowed to speak, who is allowed to grieve, who is part of the society. As the interviews show for many Palestinians and people who are in solidarity with Palestine, it has become a central barrier that limits their democratic rights and systematically erases Palestinian existence.

I discussed the issue of identity with Ramsis. “How can one identify as German when one constantly perceives this discrimination?”, Ramsis asked. He is half German; his mother is German, but there is no opportunity to identify with this side, as it is determined that he is an undesirable foreign element here. “The Staatsräson is a hostile identity toward Palestinians, which seeks to eradicate them. You can’t be torn between two sides. And identify with both somehow. Let alone just with the German side. You are segregated. It’s also about exclusion”, Ramsis stated (Interview 1, 21.4.2025).

As discussed in chapter 2.4. The German Staatsräson in the Context of Repression the principle of Staatsräson appears to be so powerful due to the history of Germany. This aspect was confirmed by my interviewees: Another person describes Staatsräson as a justification for Germany having come to terms with its history and supporting Jews and thus the State of Israel. However, the person stated, “Germany has never given a “damn” about Jews and has never come to terms with its fascist past”. This is also very evident when people talk about imported antisemitism. It’s basically a free pass to take racist measures under the guise of Staatsräson (Interview 7, 26.6.2025).

Germany’s responsibility towards Israel is used as a pretext to punish the Palestinian community. This construct is deeply racist because it portrays the Palestinian community as antisemitic while shifting the focus away from Germany’s responsibility for Jewish lives to its responsibility for the State of Israel. Otherwise, Jews in Germany who speak out in favor of Palestine would not be extremely discriminated (Achilles, 2024).

Hanno gave several important insights on how the Staatsräson influences the public opinion and journalism. He said that due to the German Staatsräson the vast majority of reports on Palestine are very biased and very loyal to the state of Germany and therefor also to the state of Israel. According to Hanno, this can be seen in the use of dehumanizing language:

It seems as if this topic is a kind of carte blanche to let any bullshit pass. And you realize that when you watch the Tagesschau, for example, to see how tendentious it is when Palestinian

people have only been described with passivating language for a year and a half. So, they die... they are not killed, they die²⁸. (Interview E2 Hanno, 22.5.2025)

Not only is passive language used, but the number of victims in the reports is almost always referenced in relation to the health center run by the “Islamist group Hamas”, which has a relativizing linguistic effect. In addition, IDF information is often adopted without verification and, in some cases, printed in full. The main criticism is that certain aspects are emphasized, meaning that others are not mentioned at all (Interview E2 Hanno, 22.5.2025). Hanno continues with an example from last year, when the ICJ announced the provisional measures in the genocide proceedings with South Africa. There, the judges, announced that they saw initial suspicion of genocide. In the German media this was hardly mentioned at all, but, a day later, there was the headline of “UNRWA was allegedly infiltrated by Hamas” (Passenheim, 2024). “How this can be allowed to happen?”, Hanno wondered. It can be observed that, although not all German journalists follow this narrative, a large part of the reporting reveals gaps in basic knowledge and a tendency to adopt state narratives without critical questioning (Interview E2 Hanno, 22.5.2025).

Hanno mentioned the German Staatsräson in relation to media reporting as not explicit but subcutaneous. Staatsräson is not part of editorial plans, but it is understood as part of the German self-image to report on Israel. Out of caution or an interpretation of historical responsibility. It is important to be careful not to be antisemitic, but one should be able to expect journalists to at least research facts or read international reports and not simply accept IDF sources unfiltered and without factual verification (Interview E2 Hanno, 22.5.2025).

The German Staatsräson is, as described in chapter 2.4., not a legal term. Lawyers like Melanie clearly state this, while she also speaks of the double standard that is applied in relation to Israel and Palestine, which, according to her, also refers to the Staatsräson. Many interlocutors emphasize which extra-legal measures the Staatsräson empowers, such as effecting university enrollment or immigration law. Fekete (2024) refers to them as “quasi laws” (p. 112) which is enforced by the whole German political landscape. The German Staatsräson has a direct impact on the Palestinians living here in Berlin, as it attempts to deny them their identity by making everything related to Palestine problematic through its pro-Israel stance. This phenomenon can also be evidenced by the fact that when Jewish people advocate on behalf of Palestine, they are equally subject to the effects of repression. Even if attempts are made to avoid using the term Staatsräson too directly in legal contexts in Germany, it still hovers over everything which is related to Palestine as a doctrine and leads to a different public assessment when it comes to this topic. Hanno Hauenstein summed it up well when he said that although it is not really written down in the editorial offices of the media houses, it is still used. The principle of Staatsräson has been identified as a factor that either exacerbates or enables the extent of repression against solidarity with Palestine.

²⁸ Es wirkt so, als wäre dieses Thema wie so eine Art Freibrief, um jeden Bullshit durchgehen zu lassen. Und das merkt man, wenn man z.B. die Tagesschau guckt, um zu sehen, wie tendenziös das ist, wenn seit eineinhalb Jahren palästinensische Menschen nur mit passivierender Sprache beschrieben werden. Also sie sterben... Werden nicht getötet, sie sterben. (Interview E2 Hanno, 22.5.2025)

5.5.2. Democracy & Rule of Law

This chapter examines how experiences of repression affect trust in democratic institutions and fundamental rights. What happens to trust in a democracy when it takes repressive action against certain population groups or political movements? When not everyone seems to have the same right to freedom of expression, demonstration, and physical integrity? The experiences of Palestinian solidarity activists in Berlin show that repression not only undermines physical and psychological security, but also the feeling of being recognized in a democratic community. According to Graeber (2007), democracy in the nation-state context has been transformed into abstract, bureaucratic procedures that alienate many people from direct political participation. This institutional distance has the capacity to erode the credibility of democratic institutions, thereby fostering an environment of mistrust (pp. 4-5).

So, I would say that democratic rights are always something that has historically been fought for from below. And through mass movements that have stood up against injustice. But they can always be turned back. We live in an extremely unequal, extremely unjust world. I would speak of a class society. And there are also oppressed people, there are exploited people. And they can only fight for their rights by fighting back and resisting²⁹. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

To show the impacts of repression to democratic subjectivity in Germany it is important to understand from which angle my interviewees are speaking and what understanding of democracy in Germany they have. Often, they face racism and exclusion from German society by default – only by being Palestine-solidaric or Palestinians themselves. Ramsis, whose family was murdered by the Israeli military in 2014, describes a moment when it became very clear to him that he is not part of German society and that different laws apply to him and his family. That moment was when he reported the Israeli army, and the German government decided not to put pressure on Israel despite evidence of a war crime (Interview 1, 21.4.2025). When talking to Ramsis about his current view on democracy in Germany, he is deeply skeptical: “The fundamental right to freedom of expression is constantly being disregarded. Fundamental democratic rights are constantly being restricted. Just look at all the bans on demonstrations or job losses because you have a certain opinion, et cetera” (Interview 1, 21.4.2025).

Another person spoke from another background, yet confirmed a similar growing frustration with German society, feelings of belonging and democracy. During the conversation with them, it became clear how difficult it is for a Palestinian and queer person to find a safe space in Berlin and Germany. Further, they reported that it is very difficult to get involved in political party structures. The person said that they used to be a member of the Green Party around the time they graduated from high school, until they realized that they are incredibly pro-Israel. For them, it was totally confusing because they thought: “If

²⁹ Also, ich würde sagen, demokratische Rechte sind immer etwas, was historisch erkämpft wurde von unten. Und durch Massenbewegungen, die sich gegen Unrecht gestellt haben. Die können aber auch immer wieder zurückgedreht werden. Wir leben in einer extrem ungleichen, extrem ungerechten Welt. Ich würde von einer Klassengesellschaft sprechen. Und es gibt auch Unterdrückte, es gibt Ausgebeutete. Und die können sich ihre Rechte nur mit Gegenwehr und Widerstand erkämpfen. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

you are left-wing, then you are left-wing and against oppression, or if you are a Green party, then you are automatically left-wing and anti-war, because there is no such thing as a green war”. The realization that in Germany, anti-Palestinian racism also extends into the “left” parties was very hard for them to accept. They realized that they have no space in the German democratic party system (Interview 4, 16.6.2025).

In another interview it became clear that even though often the expectations are not very high when it comes to the status of democracy in Germany, the current experiences reveal another level of frustration. As for instance Mohamad told me that he did not expect this extent of audacity concerning the police's actions in a “Western” country such as Germany. “The images of the police beating an elderly woman, and all this blunt violence, is not why I came to Germany”, he said. Mohamad did not come to Germany for the money. He worked in the Gulf States before and earned 3-4 times as much there, as he does now, but there were very strict rules there. “You live a very nice life and can do whatever you want. You just can't talk about politics. I did that for a while. That's the deal,” said Mohamad. He then decided to move to Germany for a better standard of living with democratic and civil liberties. Mohamad told me that he was already cynical about so-called Western democratic standards, but that he was again surprised at how quickly that image deteriorated for him when experiencing and witnessing repression. Mohamad said that Berlin has become an extremely frightening place: “Not because of what I've seen, but because of how easy it is to justify what I've already seen; it means you can justify anything”. Mohamad believes that democracy in Germany is in serious danger, given all that he has witnessed in recent months. In his opinion, this trend can be observed not only in Germany, but across Europe as a whole, where society is moving increasingly towards fascism. The measures taken by the authorities are so inconsistent and “illogical” that it is becoming increasingly difficult to predict their next move. This frightens him the most (Interview 6, 26.6.2025).

In the interview with ELSC it was stressed that the deprivation of basic democratic rights to people who are Palestinian or stand in solidarity with Palestine can be observed for a long time already. As an example, ELSC mentioned examples of (threats of) deportations. They stress that politically active people from Gaza in particular are threatened with deportation. This has a long history: In 1972, politically active Palestinian groups were banned, namely the General Union of Palestinian Students and the General Union of Palestinian Workers. As a result of this ban, members of these two organizations were expelled from Germany. ELSC then added: “We are now again observing a return to the use of migration law and nationality law to intensify repression”. By German standards, a lot of people were on the streets for the Palestinian cause since the genocide, especially when compared to before October 2023. The current deportation orders of the Berlin IV (mentioned in section 5.5.1. German Staatsräson), which mainly affect European citizens, are a clear attempt of intimidation. It was a deliberate act of intimidation to threaten three politically active EU citizens with deportation to send a message that no one is safe from this (Interview E1 ELSC, 14.5.2025).

My perspective is they want to kind of use this language or the label of democracy and keep this label while they change the system to make it more authoritarian or to restrict power more. So, if

you don't agree with the Staatsräson you don't have the right to vote because your citizenship gets revoked. If you go against the Staatsräson you get deported even if you have safe residential status. They want to keep using the word democracy, but I think it has kind of lost its meaning. (Interview 3, 29.4.2025)

This quote puts in a nutshell what was earlier described as democratic backsliding. However, this interviewee highlighted that, historically speaking, democracy has never been available to everyone but had always to be fought for. They mentioned that democracy at one point used to only include men or white people. Then democratic rights were extended to several citizens and people with citizenship were allowed to vote. Now the authorities are trying to restrict these rights again by revoking citizenship (Interview 3, 29.4.2025).

In Germany, the USA and other European countries, the person from interview 3, observes a marked discrepancy between real democracy and what is officially referred to as democracy. Despite claims by governments and many citizens to protect it, there is often silence about police violence on the streets, which suggests a contradiction and calls into question the credibility of their understanding of democracy. "If you understand the word democracy in this sense, then I don't feel included. I think Germany is as much a democracy as Israel is a democracy, which is to say not a democracy at all." They described how the authorities' actions have racist undertones, as it is clear who is being targeted and who is considered as "good" or "bad" (Interview 3, 29.4.2025). It becomes evident that many of these interpretations of who is included in democracy and the rule of law are based on racist narratives. Rights are never equal for all.

ReachOut described that in their work they can observe how trust in state institutions is so low that when those affected from repression go to support services, they always want to prove that they really haven't done anything wrong:

These people are beaten so badly that they end up in hospital and are under so much pressure that they still want to prove that they really haven't committed any crime.... That is something that is frightening³⁰. (Interview E3 ReachOut, 24.6.2025)

Those affected lose trust and hope in state institutions as they experience arbitrary measures and massive violence – often in everyday situations such as demonstrating, on the way to school or even just being in public spaces. Restoring this trust is considered unrealistic in ReachOut's work. Instead, the focus is on building solidarity structures that enable mutual support and collective action (Interview E3 ReachOut, 24.6.2025).

³⁰ Diese Menschen werden grün und blau geschlagen, krankenhaushausreif geschlagen und stehen unter so großem Druck, dass sie immer noch beweisen wollen, dass sie wirklich kein Verbrechen begangen haben.... Und das ist etwas, was erschreckend ist. (Interview E3 ReachOut, 24.6.2025)

Another aspect of democratic backsliding is the narrowing of public discourse. In my interviews this aspect was mentioned numerous times. Many people I have spoken with say that they no longer trust the German media. Before October 2023, people still followed big public media outlets such as Tagesschau – but as the genocide progressed, this became less and less common. Many people, like Noah, switched to other news platforms. “Even in the subway we see these horrible news reports”, Noah said, referring to Berliner Fenster³¹, which reproduces IDF propaganda (Interview 7, 26.6.2025). This loss of trust in the public discourse also affects the trust in democracy for many interlocutors – it’s not understandable how such a one-sided coverage can be conveyed in a democracy without any consequences.

People also have other options. Nowadays, they can follow a genocide livestream on the internet, and when they then see this distorted image in the daily newspaper or on the news, it leads to an enormous loss of trust³². (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

It is not only the one-sided media coverage of the ongoing genocide in Palestine which makes the pro-Palestinian community lose trust in democratic discourse. It is also the news coverage of their actions which make people feel as if they are alone in their opinions. Not only does this cause people who are not so well connected to become increasingly isolated and withdrawn, but it can also push people in a radical direction due to the public opinion portrayed. The smear campaigns have precisely this goal: To label people who support Palestine as extremists or as “Israel haters” (Halva, 2025). Pro-Palestine activists are portrayed as a danger, a danger to Israel, a danger to Germany and the German legal system. Consequently, the lack of media objectivity leads to extreme invisibility of legitimate criticism. This creates an ever-increasing loss of trust in democratic discourse among many people (Interview 1, 21.4.2025).

All interviewees stated that they do not feel included in the prevailing democracy in Germany. The accumulation of repression, whether at an individual level or in the social environment, results in a loss of trust in democratic institutions. Five of my interviewees were already very critical about how the German state shifts away from a democracy but were still shocked when they saw how easily democratic rights were withdrawn when it comes to Palestinian solidarity. The other interviewees described a certain situation when their solidarity with Palestine was used to take away their basic democratic rights and what this made with their ability of trust in the state. All interviewees expressed profound disappointment with these restrictions on democratic freedoms, emphasizing their deeply entrenched racist underpinnings.

This chapter showed that the general trend of democratic backsliding gets especially visible when observing how pro-Palestinian movements are being treated in Germany. What is currently happening in Berlin can be clearly classified as democratic backsliding, which leads to a dismantling of fundamental democratic rights such as freedom of expression or freedom of association. The efficacy of these

³¹ Berliner Fenster is the media outlet broadcasting on the Berlin subway screens.

³² Die Menschen haben auch andere Möglichkeiten. Heutzutage können sie einen Völkermord per Livestream im Internet verfolgen, und wenn sie dann dieses verzerrte Bild in der Tageszeitung oder in den Nachrichten sehen, führt das zu einem enormen Vertrauensverlust. (Ramsis, Interview 1, 21.4.2025)

measures is especially apparent in conjunction with restrictions and bans imposed in the context of pro-Palestinian rallies and protests. A shift in power towards the executive branch is evident, accompanied by the portrayal of pro-Palestinian demonstrators as a potential threat to public order.

6. Conclusion

Over the past two years, there has been a sharp increase in repression against people who are showing solidarity with Palestine in Berlin. Repression against various political movements has a long history, both globally and in Berlin. However, the frequency and intensity of repression, as well as its legitimization, have reached a new dimension. In this thesis, I explored which forms of repression individuals face in connection to their solidarity with Palestine in Berlin, how the repression manifest, and how the individuals cope with them. Further, my aim was to show what influence this repression has on individuals when it comes to their understanding of democracy in Germany.

In order to follow this research interest, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with 11 interlocutors: Eight of them with individuals affected by repression and 3 of them with persons from supporting or documenting organizations. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed through qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2010). A conceptual framework consisting of democratic backsliding theory, a typology of repression, concepts of experiencing repression and the principle of Staatsräson informed my analysis of the interviews.

The key findings can be summed up as following: Repression against pro-Palestinian activism is not that different in its manifestation from already known forms of repression against political movements - although the intensity and quantity of repression since October 2023 has reached an unprecedented level. Above all, when it comes to the different forms of repression, it became clear that they are widely applied and legitimized by the authorities alongside wide-spread public approval. Another key finding is that the realm of repression against pro-Palestinian activism in Berlin cannot be understood without considering the German Staatsräson. This principle of order, unique in comparison to other countries, appears as an overarching “dispositif” that drastically intensifies and escalates repression against pro-Palestinian activists in Germany and Berlin. Lastly, affected individuals develop profound frustration and disillusionment with German democracy and society – a phenomenon which fits into the general trend of democratic backsliding.

After this short summary of the key findings, I will now answer the research question and its sub-questions in more detail. I will begin by answering the sub-questions and subsequently conclude on the research question itself.

1. Which manifestations of repression are experienced?

The analysis showed that repression manifest in multifaceted ways. To cover the vast amount, it was very helpful to differentiate between overt and covert repression. Overt forms of repression are characterized by their direct impact on the individual, which can also be observed from the outside. The most dominant form of overt repression is police violence, which is used against people at protests, rallies, and events related to Palestine solidarity. All activists interviewed had been affected by police violence at least once. Police repression includes physical violence, but also arrests, surveillance, language and symbol bans,

dehumanization, and deliberate intimidation that accompanies violence. It is important to mention that racist behavior by the police was observed when it came to the treatment of people showing solidarity with Palestine. Another pattern that could be observed is the impact of being vocal about Palestine. All individuals who spoke publicly about Palestine in any form experienced repression – either directly or through a chain of repressive measures: So-called doxing campaigns are launched, which then lead to repression by institutions such as the workplace, political parties or universities. This finding shows to which extent repression manifests itself on those affected – practically in every area of their lives. Covert forms of repression are characterized by a more subtle effect on the individual and take place covertly, i.e., it is not directly recognizable from the outside. With regard to covert repression, it became clear that the manifestations of repression are very diverse. Due to the covert nature, these forms of repression are much less tangible and recognizable – yet not less severe in their consequences. They include psychological stressors such as insomnia, anxiety, and isolation and are mostly initiated by visible repression in the environment. For individuals with direct connections to Palestine the double-burden of experiencing repression while grieving intensifies the effects of the repression. To sum up, repression manifests in many ways and has an impact on numerous levels for those affected – which makes it more powerful and impossible to avoid.

2. *Which coping mechanisms and strategies of resistance do affected individuals employ?*

The different ways in which repression manifests itself has a clear impact on those affected, leading above all to changes in behavior, especially in public spaces. Those affected reported that repression leads to a feeling of fear causing them to no longer feel safe. For many, this means that they stopped wearing symbols that indicate their pro-Palestinian stance or only do so in protected spaces. Particular attention is paid to what is visible, especially in the vicinity of one's own place of residence. Above all, the strong police presence and ubiquity of violence on manifestations leads to a shift in readiness and forms of protest. However, for some individuals the repression resulted in a backlash, they became more committed with each act of repression, feeling strengthened in their actions. This pattern is particularly noticeable among people who are strongly embedded in the pro-Palestinian community. Communities help activists to feel less isolated and that they are not culpable of any transgressions. Support organizations – often targets of repression themselves – ensure that activists do not feel “broken” so that they can remain active. Organizations that provide (legal) assistance to those affected not only play a supporting role, but also a documenting one.

3. *What influence does the German Staatsräson have in the legitimization of repression?*

The German Staatsräson is neither a legal term nor a legal principle but is nevertheless used to legitimize repression against pro-Palestine movements. It entails that any criticism of Israel's actions is suspected of being antisemitic, a threat to the state of Israel and consequently – following the German Staatsräson – a threat to Germany. Since the term has no legal meaning, attempts are made to ensure that it does not appear in legal documents, as this would not be legally compliant. However, the analysis showed that this

term is still explicitly used in legal documents to justify repression. Further, the principle of German Staatsräson is extensively referred to in media or by politicians where it contributes to an anti-Palestinian narrative. To sum up, the analysis showed that the German Staatsräson serves to delegitimize and criminalize practically all acts of solidarity with Palestine in Germany.

4. How do experiences of repression shape understandings of democracy and belonging?

The analysis showed that experiences of repression have a lasting impact on respondents' understanding of democracy. Many feel that their fundamental rights are being increasingly restricted due to their solidarity with Palestine, particularly with regard to freedom of assembly and expression, but also in terms of rising police violence. Consequently, those affected no longer perceive democracy in Germany as a universal system applicable to all, but rather as a selective system that excludes certain voices. This is evident from the fact that all interviewees stated that they do not feel included in German democracy. Their experiences of repression also influence their sense of belonging to society. Many of those affected are experiencing a growing sense of alienation from German society as they lose trust in social and political institutions, and consequently in democracy itself. Despite their previous skeptical assumptions, many are extremely shocked by the ongoing erosion of democratic rights in Berlin. Nevertheless, the situation is consistent with global trends of democratic backsliding and the repression of critical voices.

How do people experience and cope with repression due to their solidarity with Palestine in Berlin and how has it influenced their understanding of democracy in Germany?

The findings of the study indicate that participants encounter diverse severe forms of repression that exert an influence on various levels of their lives. This repression may result in constraints on behavior, particularly in the vicinity of their place of residence, the visibility of pro-Palestinian symbols, and a transformation in protest practices. The opposite effect, which leads to increased engagement, is observed primarily among individuals who feel connected to the community. It has been asserted by a significant number of respondents that community networks have been instrumental in sustaining their commitment to activism, even when facing repression. The prevailing perception of democracy among the participants has been found to have undergone a substantial shift, characterized by a pervasive loss of trust and confidence in its efficacy, particularly in the context of its allowance for such repression to occur.

In addition to the limitations mentioned in the Methodology chapter 3.4., one limitation of this study is that it is based on qualitative interviews and has a relatively small sample size. This means that, while the study provides important insights into the experiences of those affected by repression in Berlin, more research has to be done following this approach. This study shows that the dynamics and specific nuances of how repression manifests can be understood best when not talking about the people affected but rather with them. Since the study focuses on a very short time, it would be beneficial to interview individuals affected by repression over a longer period. Another limitation concerns the scientific context itself: In German academia, Palestinian voices are silenced, and research on Palestine is generally not possible or only possible to a very limited extent. This affects not only the public visibility of relevant research but

also hinders institutional connectivity of academic work critically examining repression in the context of solidarity with Palestine. Due to this, it is both socially and scientifically extremely important that more research is conducted on this topic. The developments since October 2023 in Berlin have led to a new dimension of repression against the pro-Palestine community and since it is a relatively new phenomenon on this scale, there is not yet much research on it. In May 2025, the ELSC published an Index of Repression, which is of enormous importance. It helps to document repression and provides a basis for further research on the topic. This study shows that further research is essential on topics such as the media's reporting on Palestine, including human rights violations in Gaza and the West Bank, on repression in Germany – especially in Berlin – and the narrative regarding imported antisemitism in Germany. Equally important is research on the discourse surrounding the frequently used terms “terrorism” and “security threat” in relation to Palestine. A more critical reflection on the structures within German academia is also necessary to understand how discourse on Palestine is restricted, and the impact this has on research, teaching and public debate.

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8. Appendix

8.1. Interview Guide

8.1.1. Interview Guide – Affected Activists

Introduction	
Research Goal	The objective of this research is to show how people in Berlin experience repression because of their solidarity with Palestine and what effects these forms of repression have, how the individuals cope with them and how their understanding of democracy in Germany is influenced by this.
Personal Introduction	Brief introduction of myself and my studies.
Main topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences of Repressions • Strategies and Support • Changing Notions of Democracy and State Law
Anonymity and Confidentiality	<p>- The interview can be anonymous and will only be used for my master's thesis. Your name and personal details will not be mentioned anywhere if wished. Only relevant information for the research will be used.</p> <p>- Feel free to skip questions or stop at any time.</p> <p>- Is it okay if I record the interview?</p>
Questions	
Warm-up Questions	<p>- Would you like to introduce yourself briefly (as much as you feel comfortable)?</p> <p>- How did you get involved in your political engagement and solidarity with Palestine?</p> <p>- In what ways have you been engaged in the past few months (demonstrations, social media, organization, education, daily life, etc.)?</p>
Experiences of Repression	<p>- Have you experienced repression in connection with your activism? If so, how did it manifest?</p> <p>- Were there specific situations with the police, authorities, or your environment that were stressful or threatening?</p> <p>- Do you feel that you have been monitored or restricted?</p> <p>- How would you describe the behavior of the police or authorities towards pro-Palestine protests?</p> <p>- Were there consequences in your private or professional life (e.g. workplace, university, social exclusion)?</p>
Strategies and Support	<p>- How did you deal with these experiences?</p> <p>- Did you develop certain strategies to protect yourself or to organize?</p> <p>- Have your behavior or forms of expression in public changed since then?</p> <p>- Were there forms of solidarity or support from others (e.g. NGOs, organizations and initiatives, communities, lawyers)?</p>
Perception of State and Democracy	<p>- How has your view of public space, public discourse/public opinion/media, the German state, democracy, or the rule of law changed through these experiences?</p> <p>- What role does the "German Staatsräson" play in dealing with Palestine solidarity in your opinion?</p> <p>- To what extent do you perceive the measures as racist or discriminatory?</p> <p>- What does democracy mean to you – and do you feel included or excluded from it currently?</p> <p>- Have you noticed any changes since October 2023? If so, how do they manifest?</p>

Closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is there anything else that is important to you or that hasn't been discussed yet? - Thank you very much for your time. - If you have any further questions or wish to withdraw any of your answers, please feel free to contact me.
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8.1.2. Interview Guide – Support Organizations

Introduction	
Research Goal	<p>The objective of this research is to show how people in Berlin experience repression because of their solidarity with Palestine and what effects these forms of repressions have, how the individuals cope with them and how their understanding of democracy in Germany is influenced by this.</p> <p>I would also like to speak with supporting and documenting organizations to gain an assessment of the situation as well as the underlying political and societal dynamics.</p>
Personal Introduction	Brief introduction of myself and my studies.
Main topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations and Repression • Strategies and Support • Political Assessment
Anonymity and Confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The interview can be anonymous and will only be used for my master's thesis. Your name and personal details will not be mentioned anywhere if wished. Only relevant information for the research will be used. - Feel free to skip questions or stop at any time. - Is it okay if I record the interview?
Questions	
Warm-up Questions & Role of the Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could you please briefly introduce your organization and explain its goals? - What role does your organization play in the context of Palestine solidarity and related repression (e.g. police violence)? - Since when have you been documenting or observing developments in this field? - Why was the organization founded?
Observations and Repression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What forms of repression against pro-Palestinian activists have you observed or were reported to you? - Have you noticed any changes since October 2023? If so, what are they? - How do you assess the state's actions against participants in protests and individuals who express their solidarity with Palestine?
Strategies and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What specific support do you provide to affected individuals? - Which strategies have proven helpful in dealing with repression? - Do you network with other organizations or civil society actors? - To what extent are you as an organization affected by repression? How do you deal with it?
Political Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In your assessment, what role does the so-called "German Staatsräson" play in the repression you have documented? - How do you assess the impact of current repression on democracy in Germany? - How does democratic subjectivity change among those affected and their trust in democracy? - How does the perception of the rule of law change among the affected individuals?

	- Do you recognize racist structures or discourses in state actions?
Closure	- Is there anything else that is important to you or that hasn't been discussed yet? - Thank you very much for your time. - If you have any further questions or wish to withdraw any of your answers, please feel free to contact me.

8.1.3. Interview Guide – Journalist

Introduction	
Research Goal	The objective of this research is to show how people in Berlin experience repression because of their solidarity with Palestine and what effects these forms of repressions have, how the individuals cope with them and how their understanding of democracy in Germany is influenced by this. I would also like to speak with supporting and documenting entities to gain an assessment of the situation as well as the underlying political and societal dynamics.
Personal Introduction	Brief introduction of myself and my studies.
Main topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations and Repression • Strategies and Support • Political Assessment
Anonymity and Confidentiality	- The interview can be anonymous and will only be used for my master's thesis. Your name and personal details will not be mentioned anywhere if wished. Only relevant information for the research will be used. - Feel free to skip questions or stop at any time. - Is it okay if I record the interview?
Questions	
Warm-up Questions & Role as Journalist	- Could you please briefly introduce yourself and your background/motivation to report on Palestine? - Since when have you been documenting and observing developments in this field?
Observations and Repression	- What forms of repression against pro-Palestinian activists have you observed in your work? - Have you noticed any changes since October 2023? If yes, which ones? - How do you assess the state's actions against participants in protests and people who express their solidarity with Palestine? - How do you perceive the reporting in Germany on this topic?
Strategies and Support	- Which strategies have proven helpful in dealing with repression? - To what extent are you yourself also affected by repression as a journalist? How do you deal with it? - Do you network with other journalists or civil society actors?
Political Assessment	- To what extent can we speak of a democratic media landscape in connection with pro-Palestine activism? - What role does the so-called German "Staatsräson" play in the repression you have documented? - How do you assess the impact of the current repression on democracy in Germany? - How is the democratic subjectivity of those affected and their trust in democracy changing? - How does the perception of the rule of law change among those affected?

	- Do you recognize racist structures or discourses in state action?
Closure	- Is there anything else that is important to you or that hasn't been discussed yet? - Thank you very much for your time. - If you have any further questions or wish to withdraw any of your answers, please feel free to contact me.