The Limits of Tolerance: A Field Experiment at a German University on Bias against the Israeli Flag

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ABSTRACT: In the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 attacks, reports of anti-Israel expressions at German universities have raised questions about the prevalence and nature of such sentiments in academic environments. Traditional survey-based research on antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment is often limited by response biases and social desirability bias. This study introduces a novel field-experimental approach to measuring anti-Israel sentiment in a real-world university setting. Using event history analysis, it examines the removal probability of stickers of the Israeli flag compared to German, US, Palestinian, and rainbow flags at a German university. Over a 24-week period, 600 stickers were placed on 50 public notice boards and were monitored for 14-day cycles. The results provide strong evidence of anti-Israel sentiment. The Israeli flag had the highest removal rate, with only 47.5% of the flags remaining at the end of the observation period—significantly lower than the survival rates of the other flags (which range from 68% to 80%). Cox regression analysis confirms that Israeli flags faced the highest removal hazard, being 3.3 to 3.7-times more likely to be removed than the rainbow flag and nearly twice as likely as the German flag. Politically motivated removals, though less frequent, disproportionately targeted Israeli flags as well. Removal rates were highest in hallways of the humanities, shared humanities/social sciences as well as in central facilities hallways. Hallways in the natural sciences, the human- and social sciences and economics had lower removal rates. Areas with higher student traffic exhibited fewer removals. Overall, the findings indicate a pronounced anti-Israel bias on campus, distinct from attitudes toward other nationalities or symbols.

Introduction

In recent years, debates about anti-Israel sentiment have become more prominent, particularly at universities, where political expression is common. As centers of intellectual discourse, universities often serve as sites of activism, ideological confrontation, and political tension. In

this context, the visibility and treatment of Israeli symbols on campus may provide valuable insights into prevailing attitudes toward Israel and, more broadly, attitudes towards Jews and Jewish identity, as Jews are often being identified with Israel and as Israel is a central component of identity for many Jews (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2018:15).

Anti-Israel sentiment is a subject of growing academic and public concern, particularly in Western democracies. While some argue that criticism of Israeli policies is often distinct from antisemitism (Klug 2013), empirical studies suggest that anti-Israel sentiment correlates with hostility toward Jewish individuals or institutions (Beattie 2017; Beyer and Krumpal 2010; Cohen et al. 2009; Czymara et al. 2025; Enstad 2024a, 2024b; Helbling and Traunmüller 2024; Hinz, Marczuk, and Multrus 2024, 2025; Kaplan and Small 2006; Krumpal 2012; Waxman, Schraub, and Hosein 2022). This debate is particularly relevant on university campuses, where political activism and ideological divisions are common. In addition, German university campuses have seen graffiti and vandalism in support of Hamas since October 7, 2023 (Der Spiegel 2024; Die Welt 2024). This is likely to intimidate Jewish students (Lasson 2019), contributing to the alienation that the German Jewish community faces (Herrberg and Reddig 2024).

Previous research on antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment has largely relied on survey data, macro indicators and local statistics, self-reported experiences of antisemitism, or social media analyses. However, such methods can be influenced by personal perceptions, social desirability bias, and difficulties in isolating anti-Israel sentiment from broader political attitudes.

As a starting point, our study draws on a widespread everyday observation: Israeli flags, posters showing hostages, or stickers in solidarity with Israel are frequently torn down, scratched, or otherwise vandalized on German university campuses. These incidents, though not documented systematically, suggest a pattern of symbolic aggression in public university spaces. This raises several research questions: How often are Israeli flags or symbols removed or damaged? How does this compare to the treatment of other national or political symbols? And are there differences depending on the location or academic context?

To investigate these questions systematically, we employ an innovative field experiment that tracks the treatment of national and symbolic stickers on public university notice boards. Specifically, we measure the removal probability of stickers displaying the Israeli flag compared to those showing the German, U.S., Palestinian, and rainbow flags. Small stickers were chosen as a method due to their low visibility, comparability across

symbols, and their realistic presence in everyday campus life. Their small size minimizes provocation and allows for a conservative estimate of potential bias: given that they neither obstruct content nor occupy excessive space, removals are more likely to reflect negative sentiment toward the symbol itself than general disturbance or spatial necessity.

By systematically tracking sticker survival over time, we generate direct behavioral data to assess whether the Israeli flag is disproportionately targeted, indicating potential anti-Israel bias. The results indicate that the Israeli flag has the lowest survival rate among all five types of flags, with only 47.5% survived after 14 days. All other flags have significantly higher survival rates, with Germany 68.3%, Palestine 76.7%, USA 78.3%, and the rainbow flag with 80.8% survival. Removal hazards for the Israel flag are 3.3 to 3.7 times higher than the rainbow flag and nearly twice as high as the German flag. Politically motivated removals, though less frequent, also disproportionately target Israeli flags. Removal rates were highest in the humanities and shared humanities/social science as well as central facilities hallways, but lower in the natural science (STEM) departments, in the human and social sciences and the economics departments. Heavily trafficked areas also had lower removal rates. Overall, the findings suggest that a significant anti-Israel bias on campus does exist, with no comparable hostility towards the other nationalities or symbols.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding anti-Israel sentiment in university settings requires a multifaceted theoretical approach that draws on research on campus activism, political psychology, and social identity theory. In the following, we outline key theoretical perspectives that inform the study and allow us to understand the anti-Israel sentiment it has identified.

Education has long been assumed to serve as a protective factor against antisemitism. Numerous studies confirm a positive correlation between formal education and increased sensitivity to discrimination (Wodtke 2012): Higher levels of education are associated with a stronger rejection of negative racial stereotypes and a greater likelihood of recognizing that minorities face discrimination. This pattern applies not only to racist attitudes but also to antisemitic ones. However, recent research has differentiated these findings. While it is consistently observed that classic antisemitic stereotypes—such as notions of Jewish power, influence, or conspiracy—decline with increasing education, this trend does not extend to more modern, reconfigured expressions of antisemitism. Forms such as antisemitism of guilt-deflection, the rejection of the current commemorative culture, or resentment toward Israel are significantly more resistant to education (Zick 2015). This phenomenon, often described

as "educated antisemitism," has been conceptually and empirically examined by scholars such as Monika Schwarz-Friesel and Jehuda Reinharz (Reinharz & Schwarz-Friesel 2013; Schwarz-Friesel 2015). It refers to the transformation of antisemitic beliefs into linguistically polished, culturally coded, and seemingly rational discourses—particularly prevalent among educated populations.

Empirical evidence of antisemitism within higher education settings remains limited but revealing. In a comparative study among university students in Germany and Canada, Kassis and Schallié (2013) found that nearly 60% of respondents accused Jews of instrumentalizing the Holocaust, while up to 40% expressed at least partial agreement with traditional antisemitic stereotypes. A more recent qualitative study by Johannes Sosada (2025) further highlights this development. Based on interviews with German university students, the study identifies persistent patterns of stereotyping, antisemitism of guilt-deflection , and hostility toward Israel in students' discourse. Sosada shows that antisemitism in academic contexts frequently manifests in camouflaged, moralizing, and rationalized forms, often shielded by political language or appeals to academic critique. Zick argues that education can only function as a genuine protective factor when it is normatively anchored, democratically framed, and reflective in nature. When societal norms are vague, inconsistent, or weakly enforced, this protective effect weakens—sometimes dramatically. Under such conditions, even highly educated individuals are more likely to express antisemitic beliefs, albeit in indirect, rhetorically sophisticated, or morally reframed ways (Zick 2015). This confirms Zick's broader observation that in educated contexts, antisemitic content often surfaces through discursive strategies, where traditional hostility is replaced by semantic veiling and intellectual legitimization.

This dynamic is closely linked to the concept of antisemitism of guilt-deflection, which Reinharz and Schwarz-Friesel describe as a reaction not only to Jewish suffering, but also to the very presence of Holocaust memory in public discourse. As they observe: "In German discourse, hostility toward Jews is significantly shaped by emotional tendencies of guilt, shame, and resistance to remembrance, by the repression of responsibility, and by a mentality of being fed up with the past" (Reinharz & Schwarz-Friesel 2013:6). This emphasis on the emotional and defensive dimensions of antisemitism is not merely of theoretical interest—it is central to understanding antisemitic attitudes in democratic societies. In this context, the experimental study by Imhoff and Banse (2009) is particularly instructive. The authors explore how the perception of ongoing victim suffering—specifically, the continued suffering of Jewish Holocaust survivors—influences prejudice. Their core finding is

paradoxical: The more strongly people perceive a group as continuing to suffer, the more likely they are to express negative attitudes toward that group. Rather than fostering empathy, the reminder of victimhood may provoke resentment and resistance, a response that the authors interpret as a reactance mechanism. Confronted with collective guilt or moral obligation, individuals may respond with denial, justification, or aggression—all of which can take on antisemitic forms. This effect was most pronounced under the so-called “Bogus Pipeline” condition, in which participants believed that a machine could detect their true attitudes. With the pressure of social desirability reduced, participants expressed significantly more antisemitic prejudice than those in the control group. This strongly suggests that such views are often not absent, but merely suppressed in public or normative contexts. This illustrates that antisemitism of guilt-deflection —that is, antisemitic reactions to memory culture, to the attribution of guilt, or to the continued recognition of Jewish victimhood—is not a fringe phenomenon. On the contrary, it represents a socially impactful and psychologically explainable process, particularly in educated environments, where resentment is more likely to be expressed through morally or politically rationalized rejections. These may take the form of demands for a “Schlussstrich” (a final break with the past), outrage at perceived moral blackmail through remembrance, or the projection of antisemitic stereotypes onto the State of Israel.

These findings highlight how universities are not only spaces of intellectual engagement but also sites of normative formation, where students adopt specific moral and political orientations. This environment—marked by activism, progressive movements, and ideological contestation—inevitably shapes how global conflicts and minority identities are perceived and negotiated on campus. Brońić & Miles find, for instance, that students are more likely to endorse moral absolutism and “emerge from university with a moral profile characterized by high concern for others and weak commitment to traditional social order" (2021:873).

Within this context, Jewish American students increasingly report being exposed to antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiment in university settings (Saxe et al. 2015; Shenhav-Goldberg and Kopstein 2020). These experiences underscore the complex ways in which higher education environments, despite their liberal and inclusive self-image, can become spaces where prejudice and exclusion persist—albeit in more indirect or ideologically reframed forms.

While the German university student population has not yet been specifically studied (but see, however, recently. Lutter et al. 2025), young Germans are likely to identify with

Palestinians and hold anti-Israel attitudes (Hinz, Marczuk, and Multrus 2024, 2025; Helbling and Traunmüller 2024). This solidarity with Palestine may become part of these students' social identity. Social identity theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their group memberships (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009; Tajfel & Turner 1979; Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008). The same is true for their social status in relation to other social groups (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). In politically polarized environments, such as university campuses, ingroup-outgroup dynamics often intensify, leading to the reinforcement of social divisions (Huddy 2001; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). In the context of this study, the removal of Israeli flags could be interpreted as a manifestation of group-based opposition to Israel as a perceived outgroup. Given the broader political discourse surrounding Israel and Palestine, students who strongly identify with pro-Palestinian or left-wing activist groups may be more inclined to remove Israeli symbols as an expression of their group identity. Overall, however, antisemitic attitudes are widespread among Germans on both the far right and the far left (Zacher and Shemla 2024).

Group memberships also come with certain behavioral norms (Tajfel 1982). These norms can include endorsing or ignoring political expressions that would otherwise be sanctioned (Álvarez-Benjumea 2022; Alvarez-Benjumea and Valentim 2022; Álvarez-Benjumea and Winter 2018). In the context of our research, it is likely that being exposed to anti-Israel sentiment will make students more likely to tear down or damage Israeli flag stickers. Similarly, there is evidence that students in antisemitic environments will in turn express more antisemitism (Beyer and Krumpal 2010).

Symbolic threat theory (Stephan & Stephan 2000) suggests that certain symbols or identities can be perceived as threats to a group's values, beliefs, or worldview. Individuals who perceive a symbolic threat are more likely to engage in exclusionary or antagonistic behaviors (Stephan, Renfro, and Davis 2008). In the case of the Israeli flag, its removal may stem from a perception that it represents an ideological position that conflicts with dominant narratives within specific university communities. This concerns not only the narrative of Palestinian solidarity common on the political left, but also the narrative of Israel being a malevolent actor that is associated with conspiracy beliefs (Allington, Hirsh, and Katz 2023a, 2023b). This, in turn, is more common on the political right (Schließler, Hellweg and Decker 2020).

Within this framework, political symbols—such as national flags—become focal points for ideological contestation as well as political identification. On a general level, prior research has shown that symbols associated with emotional and moral value are more likely to

elicit strong behavioral responses (Brady, Crockett, and Van Bavel 2020; Brońić and Miles 2021). The Israeli flag, as a potent political symbol, may thus be particularly vulnerable to removal in certain ideological climates.

The phenomenon of low-cost activism, sometimes referred to as "slacktivism" (Morozov 2011), highlights how individuals engage in political action when the cost of participation is minimal. The removal of stickers is a relatively low-effort action that allows individuals to express political opinions without significant social or institutional consequences. Given that notice boards are accessible and provide a degree of anonymity, they may serve as convenient sites for symbolic political expression.

Previous studies on campus free speech and political tolerance (Gibson 1992) have demonstrated that individuals are more likely to tolerate speech aligned with their ideological beliefs while opposing expressions they perceive as contradicting their values (Zacher and Shemla 2024). The differential treatment of the Israeli flag compared to other national or symbolic flags may reflect underlying biases in political tolerance, wherein symbols associated with Israel face greater opposition due to prevailing campus discourses (Beyer and Krumpal 2010; Cheng 2022; Marcus 2007; Shenhav-Goldberg and Kopstein 2020).
Based on these theoretical perspectives and previous empirical findings, the interplay between political climate, social identity, symbolic threat, and low-cost activism provides a lens through which we expect a stronger removal pattern for the Israel flag than any other symbol. The following sections will empirically test this theoretical expectation through systematic analysis of flag removal rates and their contextual determinants.

Data and Methods

Study design and sample

To test our hypothesis, we conducted an event history analysis of the probability of removing the Israeli flag at a German university. We chose an average-sized German university campus located in North Rhine-Westphalia. The study took place during the spring and fall semesters of 2024/25; it began on May 24, 2024, and ended on January 31, 2025, excluding the lecture-free period between August and October. In the many corridors of the university, there are public bulletin boards where anyone can post notes, posters, or flyers to make university-wide announcements, advertisements, and other student- or research-related notices. These announcements usually include, but are not limited to, flyers offering student jobs, advertisements for apartments and student housing, invitations to parties and advertisements for university-wide academic events. Political statements are also noted, often flyers against

racism or invitations to demonstrations. Additionally, student council elections were held during our observation period, leading to a period of increased political statements.

We count a total number of 50 public notice boards on the university's main campus. Some are located near central facilities, such as the library or the dining hall; others are located in the hallways near seminar rooms, lecture halls or next to offices of the faculty or staff offices. Except for the central facilities, the hallways are usually associated with a particular faculty, such as natural sciences, humanities or economics.

We professionally printed small stickers showing the Israeli flag and four other flags that we use for comparison: a rainbow flag, a German flag, a U.S. flag, and a Palestinian flag. The stickers were relatively small, with a size of 4 cm in height and 5 cm in width. Figure 1 shows pictures of the stickers. We deliberately chose a rather small size for the stickers. They are not immediately noticeable and are rather inconspicuous. They also do not "hurt" – their small size minimizes provocation and rather allows for a conservative estimate of potential bias: given that they neither obstruct content nor occupy excessive space, removals are more likely to reflect negative sentiment toward the symbol itself than general disturbance or spatial necessity. There should be no reason to remove them other than animosity toward the symbol they carry. The small size of the flags provides a more conservative estimate of anti-Israel bias, as a much larger size would likely elicit stronger emotional triggers.

[Figure 1 about here]

With support of three research assistants, we systematically placed the stickers on the 50 notice boards across campus—one sticker per board at a time—ensuring a random distribution (see Figure A1 in the appendix for an example of a rainbow flag place at the top, middle, or lower part of a notice board). Each board was monitored every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to record the condition of each sticker. We distinguished four possible outcomes: (1) the sticker had been removed, (2) it had been covered or altered with clearly political content, (3) it had been covered by a non-political or neutral poster (e.g., party announcements or advertisements), or (4) it remained intact. After 14 days, we removed all remaining stickers and initiated a new round, again using randomly assigned sticker types. This procedure was repeated twelve times over a total period of 24 weeks.

In total, our study lasted twelve observation periods of 14 days, or 24 weeks. It took place over the course of the spring 2024 and fall 2024/25 semesters, excluding the summer break (mid-July 2024 to late September 2024) and the Christmas break (December 20, 2024

to January 5, 2025). Each observation period would begin on a Friday afternoon (a time when there is typically little student traffic, allowing the researcher team to place or replace stickers unnoticed). Observation days were always the afternoon/early evening of the following Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of the first week, and the Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of the second week. The Friday of the second week would then be the day we would refresh all the boards with new stickers. The team was always careful not to be seen by anyone.
Our final dataset consists of a total of 4,200 observations of 600 flags (50 boards with one randomly placed flag * 12 periods = 600 flags; 600 flags * 7 days of observation per period = 4,200). Each of the five flags is equally represented, with each motif appearing in 1/5 or 20% of the cases.

Outcome

We draw on two main outcome variables and two "control" outcomes that we use in a placebo test. (1) The first main outcome is the number of days until a flag is removed within the 14-day period. (2) The second main outcome is the number of days until the flag is politically addressed: either by placing a clearly visible political statement or flyer directly on the flag or by actively commenting on the flag or right next to it. Figures A2-A8 in the appendix show photographs of instances of politically motivated removals/destructions of the flags. (3) If a sticker is simply covered by a neutral poster (a party announcement or other neutral poster/flyer), we do not count that as a removal in the above sense. Rather, we count it as a neutral event, which forms our first "control" outcome. (4) The second control outcome is when the board is completely cleaned by the university's janitors. From time to time, the janitors would remove all posters/flyers from the notice boards to create room for new ones; this happens about twice per semester. This removal counts as neutral as well.

Covariates

We control for a number of covariates that may confound the probability of a flag being removed. First, we control for the location of the board with seven different locations: 1) *Humanities*. Boards in this category are located in the hallway of the humanities department's offices and seminar rooms. 2) *Human/Social Sciences*. These are Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, Educational Sciences, and Geography. 3) *Economics.* These are both Economics and Business Administration. 4) *Natural Sciences*. These are Mathematics, Physics, Biology, and Chemistry. 5) *Shared Humanities/Social Science.* These are boards located at the intersection of both the Humanities and Social Sciences departments. 6) *Central*

facilities. These boards are located in the hallways of central services, such as the library or the dining hall. They have no clear affiliation with a particular faculty. 7) *Art/Design*. These are boards are located in hallways of the Art/Design faculty. We do not include the faculties of Engineering, Communication Technology, and Architecture because they were located on a different campus. Second, we control for a *frequency index* that measures how highly a hallway is typically trafficked. This is a four-point additive index of four individual characteristics of the board's hallway: 1) seminar rooms or lecture halls are nearby, 2) restrooms are nearby, 3) the hallway leads to a main entrance/exit, 4) the hallway leads to a central facility such as a students' coffee shop or library. Third, we control the position of the sticker on the board, with three values: 1) high position (the sticker is placed above eye level, 2) middle position (the sticker is placed at eye level), 3) low position (the sticker is placed below eye level). We assume that stickers at eye level have a larger removal likelihood.

Analytical Strategy

We begin with a detailed descriptive examination of the incidence rates of flag removal and the survival probabilities of Israeli stickers compared to the other four motives. Second, we present a series of Cox regressions to estimate and compare the hazards of removing the Israeli flag relative to the other flags. Each regression begins with a baseline model that includes only flag type, while three subsequent models successively add the covariates. All models use robust standard errors clustered by flag id. A replication package containing data and code to reproduce all results can be assessed from an Open Science Framework server.[1]

Results

Descriptive results

Table 1 gives a detailed overview on the survival history of all flags over the course of the 14-days observation period. As can be seen in the last row (all flags together), the observation period starts on the first day with all 600 flags. On day 3 (Monday, first week), we count 36 removals, reducing the number of surviving flags to 564 (and leading to a survival rate of 94%). After day 5 (Wednesday, first week), 44 additional removals occur, further reducing the survival probability to 82%. 520 flags still remain on day 7 (Friday, first week), after which another 27 are removed. On day 10, the Monday of the second week, only 8 further flags are removed, leading to a drop in survival probability from 82 to 80%. On day 12, the

[1] See the following link: https://osf.io/j7x3w/?view_only=cdd53196cc994d41b5ead58f3a636e19.

Wednesday of the second week, 38 additional removals occur, reducing the survival probability to 74.5%. Finally, on day 14, the Friday of second week, we observe another 25 removals at the last day of the observation cycle. The observation ends with a total number of 178 removals and 422 surviving flags, which is a removal rate of 30% and a survival probability of 70%, respectively. The overall trend suggests a continuous decline in survival probability as the duration increases, with Wednesday, the busiest day at a university, being the day with the highest amount of flag removals.

[Table 1 about here]

If we look at the flag types individually, it can be seen that the flag of Israel shows the highest removal hazard, with a steep decline in survival probability over the course of 14 days. By day 5, the survival probability drops to 75%, and by day 14, only 47.5% of the Israeli flags remain, with 52.5% having been removed. All other flags remain with a much higher survival rate. The rainbow flag and the US flag show the highest survival rates, with 80% and 78% respectively remaining after 14 days, followed by the Palestinian flag (77%) and the German flag (68%) at the end of the observation period.

Figure 2 displays the survival rates in a graph. As can be seen, the survival probability for the Israeli flag declines sharply between days 3 and 7, highlighting a distinctively early removal pattern. This rapid survival decline may indicate group-specific risk factors affecting specifically the Israeli nationality, suggesting an anti-Israel sentiment and a lack of protective factors that are more inherent for the other flags.

[Figure 2 about here]

Regression results

To investigate these differences further, we now turn to multivariate analysis and present a series of nested Cox models. The statistical modeling starts with a baseline model that includes the four flag types with one as a references category, and then ads further control variables in the subsequent models. In Table 2, we present the results. Models 1 to 4 present the results with the rainbow flag as the reference category. The removal hazard for Israel is the highest among all flags, with Israel having a rate that is 3.321 to 3.683-times higher than the rainbow flag. As can be seen, the German flag also has a (partly) significant higher removal rate than the rainbow flag, ranging from 1.7 to 1.654-times higher. The flag of

Palestine also has a higher removal rate than the rainbow flag, but the difference is not statistically significant throughout the models.

[Table 2 about here]

Models 5 to 8 show the results with Germany as a reference category. As Germany has the second-largest incidence rate, a comparison to Germany rather forms a conservative estimate for the removal hazard of the Israeli flag. As can be seen, however, Israel still has a significantly higher hazard ratio compared to Germany and compared to all other flags. The removal hazard for an Israeli flag is about 1.9-times to 2.226-times higher than the hazard for a German flag, and it is statistically significant throughout all models. The three remaining flags all show lower hazard risks; the rainbow flag is the only one that has a significant negative hazard, i.e., it has a significantly higher survival rate in relation to the German flag. The control variables reveal notable further insights. Locations of central facilities as well as hallways in the faculties of the humanities and shared humanities/social sciences show the highest removal rates compared to the natural sciences. Faculties of human- and social sciences (mostly psychology, sociology, geography, political science) show rather lower removal rates than the natural sciences, but these differences are not significant. There is no significant interaction effect with location and type of flag (results not shown), which means that the Israeli flag or any other type of flag is not a special target in any specific faculty hallway.

The negatively significant frequency index tells us that the more students populate a hallway, the less likely flags are being removed. This implies that social desirability limits the extent to which flags are removed, which is to be expected. Lastly, the position on the board itself suggests that flags located at the lower or the middle part of a board have a slightly higher removal hazard as compared to the top position, but this difference is not statistically significant.

Turning the analysis now to our second outcome variable, measuring only those removals that were combined with a politically motivated message or were being pasted over with a political message or flyer/poster. Here, the number of events is much lower, with only 40 events in total. Yet, the Israeli flag still faces the highest amount of events among the five groups, followed by Palestine, USA, rainbow flag, and Germany. Out of the 40 events, we observe 9 events directed to Israel (0.7% incidence rate), 8 to Palestine (0.6% incidence rate),

7 to the USA (0.4% incidence rate), 5 towards the rainbow flag (0.4% incidence rate), and 4 to the German flag (0.2% incidence rate).

Table 3 replicates the models of Table 2 with this outcome variable. As can be seen, Israel shows again significant politically motivated hazards, with coefficients varying between 3.07 and 3.209 when the German flag is taken as reference. When the rainbow flag is taken as reference, however, the hazard remains higher, but not statistically significant. The flag of Palestine also shows a relatively high hazard, with coefficients varying between 1.4 and 2.8, but with statistical significance at 10% only in the last model. Notably, the control variables all do not show any significant coefficients, suggesting that location, faculty or frequencies in the hallways do not play a prominent role in explaining these politically motivated events. One exception is placement position at the notice board itself; here, a low position seems to be associated with a lower risk of experiencing this event (only at $p<.10$, however), suggesting that politically motivated actions probably locate themselves more prominently in the middle or in the top position in order to increase visibility.

[Table 3 about here]

Placebo analysis

In order to check the plausibility of the results, Table 4 and 5 replicate the models but this time using two neutral events for the event variable. Table 4 takes the event "flag was covered by a neutral poster" and Table 5 the event "the board was cleaned, all flyers were removed". While the neutral covering of a flag is a comparatively common event, with 200 events in total, the removal of all flyers on a board occurs only 26-times during the observation period. Since these events are supposed to be neutral, we expect no systematic variation with regard to the five flags. As can be seen, this is actually the case. Neither Table 4 nor Table 5 show any significant differences, with all flags showing equally (non-significant) covering or removal hazards.

[Table 4 about here]
[Table 5 about here]

Conclusion

This study examines anti-Israel sentiment at a German university by analyzing the removal probability of Israeli flag stickers compared to other flags (Germany, USA, Palestine, and the

rainbow flag). Over 24 weeks, we placed 600 stickers on 50 public notice boards and observed their survival over 14-day periods. The results indicate that the Israeli flag has the highest removal rate, followed with a significant margin by all other flags. By the end of each observation period, only 47.5% of Israeli flags remained, significantly lower than the survival rates of the other flags (ranging from 68% to 80%). The most frequent removal days were university peak days (e.g., Wednesdays). Cox regressions confirm that the Israeli flag faces the highest removal hazard—3.3 to 3.7 times higher than the rainbow flag and nearly twice as high as the German flag. Politically motivated removals, though less frequent, also disproportionately targeted Israeli flags. We further find that removal rates were highest in humanities and social science faculties, while heavily trafficked areas had lower removal rates. Overall, the findings suggest a significant anti-Israel bias on campus, with no comparable hostility towards other nationalities or symbols.

This study advances the existing literature in several important ways. First, it moves beyond self-reported perceptions by directly capturing behavioral outcomes, thereby minimizing the influence of social desirability bias. Its novel, systematic approach to assessing anti-Israel sentiment provides a rare opportunity to observe real-world behavior in a natural university environment. Second, by incorporating multiple national and symbolic flags as comparison categories, the study enables a differentiated analysis that disentangles specific anti-Israel bias from more general hostility toward national symbols or political expression. Third, the design accounts for contextual variables—such as the location of the notice board, hallway foot traffic, and the precise placement of the stickers—ensuring a nuanced and robust understanding of the observed patterns.

The study, while methodologically rigorous, has several limitations: First, the research is conducted at a single German university, which may not represent broader trends across different universities, regions, or countries. Cultural, political, or institutional factors specific to this campus might influence the results. Second, while higher removal rates for Israeli flags suggest anti-Israel sentiment, the study cannot directly assess individual motivations. Some removals might be due to random vandalism or other unknown factors rather than explicit bias. However, if all of the observed removals would have been random, then we would not see any statistical differences in removal hazards between any of the flags. Thus, our results show that the Israeli flag is a specific target for removal. Third, there is no knowledge about the individual persons who removed the flags. It remains unknown whether they are graduate or undergraduate students, if they are scientific staff or janitors of the university or just outside visitors of the campus (although this is rather unlikely). It is even possible that all

removals were carried out by a single individual. Fourth, despite careful placement and monitoring, university staff or students might have noticed the research activity over time, which could have influenced removal behavior as well. However, we believe that this is unlikely because replacements always took place when there was only very little student traffic (Friday afternoon). Lastly, the study period may have coincided with specific global or national events that may have temporarily intensified political tensions, affecting removal rates in ways that might not be stable over time. Despite these limitations, we believe that the study provides valuable empirical insights into campus-based anti-Israel sentiment. However, future research could replicate the study's design in a different region, at a different time, and at different types of universities.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

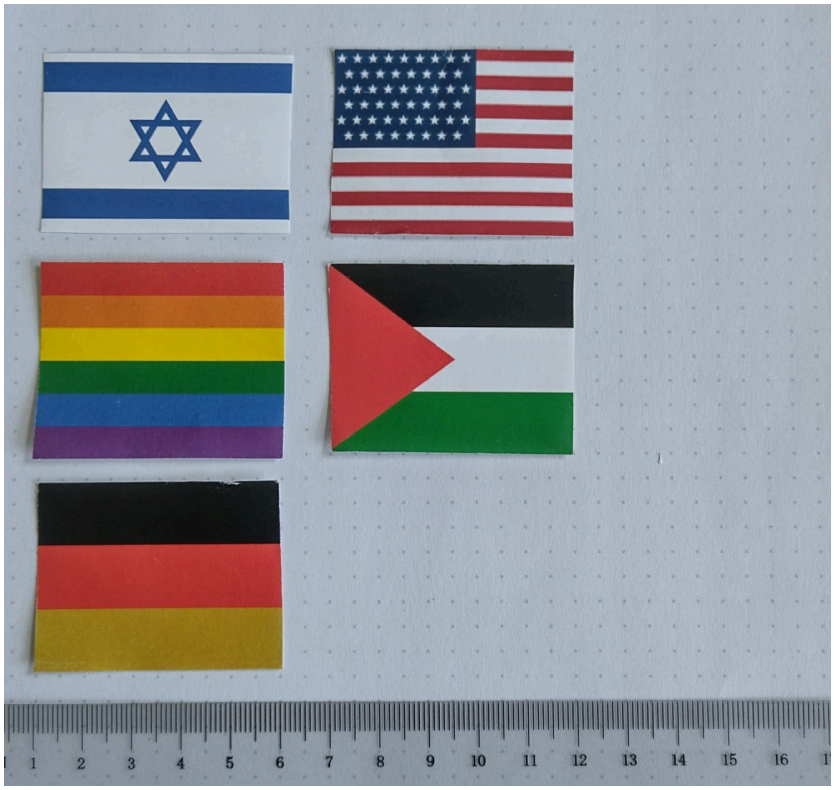

Figure 1: The stickers used in the experiment, showing the motives (top row: Israel and USA, middle row: rainbow and Palestine, bottom row: Germany) and their sizes, approximately 4 centimeters in height and 5 centimeters in width.

Table 1: Removal and survival history of stickers used in this study

Type of Flag	# days	# removals at # of day	# flags remaining	Survivor rate (in %)
Israel	1	0	120	100.0
	3	13	107	89.2
	5	17	90	75.0
	7	10	80	66.7
	10	4	76	63.3
	12	14	62	51.7
	14	5	57	47.5
Germany	1	0	120	100.0
	3	5	115	95.8
	5	9	106	88.3
	7	6	100	83.3
	10	1	99	82.5
	12	10	89	74.2
	14	7	82	68.3
Palestine	1	0	120	100.0
	3	5	115	95.8
	5	6	109	90.8
	7	5	104	86.7
	10	1	103	85.8
	12	8	95	79.2
	14	3	92	76.7
USA	1	0	120	100.0
	3	6	114	95.0
	5	8	106	88.3
	7	3	103	85.8
	10	1	102	85.0
	12	3	99	82.5
	14	5	94	78.3
Rainbow	1	0	120	100.0
	3	7	113	94.2
	5	4	109	90.8
	7	3	106	88.3
	10	1	105	87.5
	12	3	102	85.0
	14	5	97	80.8
All flags in total	1	0	600	100.0
	3	36	564	94.0
	5	44	520	86.7
	7	27	493	82.2
	10	8	485	80.8
	12	38	447	74.5
	14	25	422	70.3

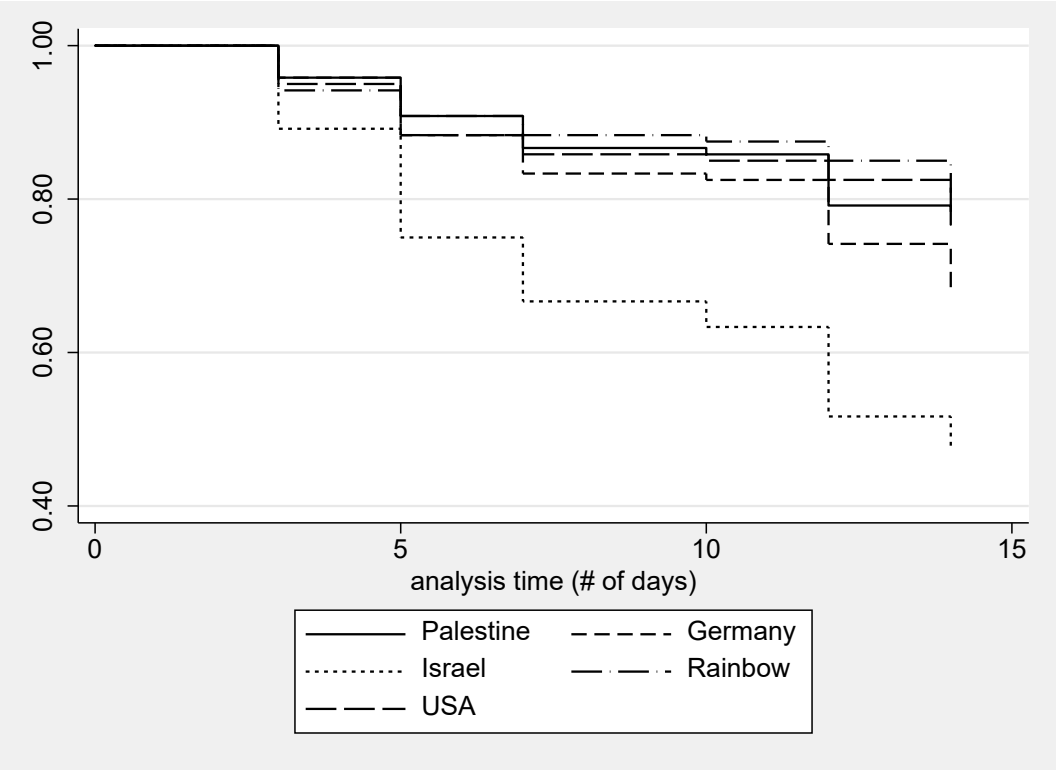

Figure 2: Survival rates (Kaplan-Meier estimates)
of stickers, by flag type

Table 2: Main results (1): Cox regressions using outcome variable "flag removed"

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Palestine	1.232	1.307	1.276	1.261	0.719	0.761	0.749	0.763
	(0.76)	(0.97)	(0.88)	(0.84)	(-1.38)	(-1.11)	(-1.17)	(-1.09)
Germany	1.714*	1.717*	1.703*	1.654+	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*
	(2.10)	(2.09)	(2.05)	(1.92)				
Israel	3.321***	3.699***	3.712***	3.683***	1.937***	2.154***	2.180***	2.226***
	(5.04)	(5.53)	(5.57)	(5.53)	(3.42)	(3.87)	(3.90)	(3.97)
Rainbow	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	0.583*	0.582*	0.587*	0.605+
					(-2.10)	(-2.09)	(-2.05)	(-1.92)
USA	1.147	1.279	1.188	1.157	0.669	0.745	0.697	0.700
	(0.49)	(0.87)	(0.61)	(0.51)	(-1.62)	(-1.16)	(-1.41)	(-1.39)
Humanities		1.934*	2.436*	2.435*		1.934*	2.436*	2.435*
		(1.96)	(2.57)	(2.54)		(1.96)	(2.57)	(2.54)
Social/Human Sciences		0.530	0.613	0.587		0.530	0.613	0.587
		(-1.31)	(-0.99)	(-1.08)		(-1.31)	(-0.99)	(-1.08)
Economics		0.657	0.692	0.670		0.657	0.692	0.670
		(-0.68)	(-0.59)	(-0.65)		(-0.68)	(-0.59)	(-0.65)
Natural Sciences		*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*		*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*
Shared Humanities/ SocScie		5.280***	7.308***	7.831***		5.280***	7.308***	7.831***
		(3.39)	(3.96)	(4.08)		(3.39)	(3.96)	(4.08)
Central Facilities		2.400**	3.116***	3.002**		2.400**	3.116***	3.002**
		(2.72)	(3.40)	(3.27)		(2.72)	(3.40)	(3.27)
Art/Design		1.887+	1.535	1.483		1.887+	1.535	1.483
		(1.75)	(1.14)	(1.05)		(1.75)	(1.14)	(1.05)
FreqIndex			0.753**	0.752**			0.753**	0.752**
			(-3.11)	(-3.12)			(-3.11)	(-3.12)
Position high				*Ref. cat.*				*Ref. cat.*
Position Middle				1.461				1.461
				(1.36)				(1.36)
Position low				1.442				1.442
				(1.44)				(1.44)
Observations	3709	3709	3709	3709	3709	3709	3709	3709
N (flags)	600	600	600	600	600	600	600	600
N (removals)	178	178	178	178	178	178	178	178
Pseudo R2	0.0170	0.0327	0.0366	0.0376	0.0170	0.0327	0.0366	0.0376

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients; *t* statistics in parentheses; robust standard errors clustered by flag id;
$^{+}\ p < 0.10$, $^{*}\ p < 0.05$, $^{**}\ p < 0.01$, $^{***}\ p < 0.001$

Table 3: Main results (2): Cox regressions using outcome variable "flag politically addressed"

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Palestine	1.431	1.396	1.375	1.544	2.547	2.626	2.632	2.787+
	(0.73)	(0.67)	(0.64)	(0.86)	(1.59)	(1.57)	(1.57)	(1.67)
Germany	0.562	0.532	0.523	0.554	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*
	(-0.92)	(-1.01)	(-1.03)	(-0.94)				
Israel	1.725	1.697	1.666	1.778	3.070+	3.192*	3.187*	3.209*
	(1.15)	(1.14)	(1.10)	(1.24)	(1.96)	(2.01)	(2.01)	(1.98)
Rainbow	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	1.780	1.881	1.913	1.805
					(0.92)	(1.01)	(1.03)	(0.94)
USA	1.006	0.960	0.915	0.929	1.791	1.807	1.751	1.676
	(0.01)	(-0.07)	(-0.16)	(-0.14)	(0.93)	(0.93)	(0.89)	(0.81)
Humanities		0.766	0.876	0.836		0.766	0.876	0.836
		(-0.38)	(-0.18)	(-0.25)		(-0.38)	(-0.18)	(-0.25)
Social/Human Sciences		1.214	1.334	1.233		1.214	1.334	1.233
		(0.25)	(0.38)	(0.28)		(0.25)	(0.38)	(0.28)
Economics		1.586	1.625	1.697		1.586	1.625	1.697
		(0.50)	(0.52)	(0.58)		(0.50)	(0.52)	(0.58)
Natural Sciences		*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*		*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*
Shared Humanities/ SocScie		2.006	2.468	2.888		2.006	2.468	2.888
		(0.59)	(0.75)	(0.91)		(0.59)	(0.75)	(0.91)
Central Facilities		1.632	1.905	2.165		1.632	1.905	2.165
		(0.79)	(0.99)	(1.24)		(0.79)	(0.99)	(1.24)
Art/Design		1.301	1.136	1.119		1.301	1.136	1.119
		(0.37)	(0.18)	(0.15)		(0.37)	(0.18)	(0.15)
FreqIndex			0.829	0.802			0.829	0.802
			(-1.10)	(-1.29)			(-1.10)	(-1.29)
Position high				*Ref. cat.*				*Ref. cat.*
Position Middle				1.266				1.266
				(0.51)				(0.51)
Position low				0.427+				0.427+
				(-1.92)				(-1.92)
Observations	4077	4077	4077	4077	4077	4077	4077	4077
N (flags)	600	600	600	600	600	600	600	600
N (removals)	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40
Pseudo R2	0.00999	0.0166	0.0184	0.0380	0.00999	0.0166	0.0184	0.0380

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients; *t* statistics in parentheses; robust standard errors clustered by flag id;
$^{+}\ p < 0.10$, $^{*}\ p < 0.05$, $^{**}\ p < 0.01$, $^{***}\ p < 0.001$

Table 4: Placebo analysis (1): Results of Cox regressions using outcome variable (3) "flag neutrally covered"

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Palestine	0.829	0.856	0.855	0.821	1.201	1.159	1.146	1.167
	(-0.92)	(-0.79)	(-0.80)	(-1.02)	(0.82)	(0.66)	(0.62)	(0.69)
Germany	0.690+	0.739	0.746	0.703	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*
	(-1.68)	(-1.37)	(-1.34)	(-1.62)				
Israel	0.806	0.888	0.899	0.853	1.169	1.201	1.204	1.213
	(-1.05)	(-0.58)	(-0.53)	(-0.79)	(0.69)	(0.80)	(0.82)	(0.85)
Rainbow	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	1.449+	1.353	1.340	1.422
					(1.68)	(1.37)	(1.34)	(1.62)
USA	0.766	0.801	0.816	0.750	1.110	1.084	1.094	1.067
	(-1.28)	(-1.07)	(-0.98)	(-1.38)	(0.45)	(0.35)	(0.39)	(0.28)
Humanities		4.652***	4.183**	3.962**		4.652***	4.183**	3.962**
		(3.34)	(3.09)	(2.96)		(3.34)	(3.09)	(2.96)
Social/Human Sciences		1.834	1.708	1.483		1.834	1.708	1.483
		(1.10)	(0.97)	(0.71)		(1.10)	(0.97)	(0.71)
Economics		2.534	2.553	2.406		2.534	2.553	2.406
		(1.54)	(1.55)	(1.46)		(1.54)	(1.55)	(1.46)
Natural Sciences		*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*		*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*
Shared Humanities/ SocScie		7.675***	6.475**	7.647***		7.675***	6.475**	7.647***
		(3.54)	(3.21)	(3.34)		(3.54)	(3.21)	(3.34)
Central Facilities		7.892***	6.811***	6.415***		7.892***	6.811***	6.415***
		(4.60)	(4.19)	(4.04)		(4.60)	(4.19)	(4.04)
Art/Design		1.008	1.173	1.061		1.008	1.173	1.061
		(0.01)	(0.26)	(0.10)		(0.01)	(0.26)	(0.10)
FreqIndex			1.193*	1.185*			1.193*	1.185*
			(2.04)	(2.00)			(2.04)	(2.00)
Position high				*Ref. cat.*				*Ref. cat.*
Position Middle				2.845***				2.845***
				(3.32)				(3.32)
Position low				2.316**				2.316**
				(2.93)				(2.93)
Observations	3636	3636	3636	3636	3636	3636	3636	3636
N (flags)	600	600	600	600	600	600	600	600
N (removals)	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
Pseudo R2	0.00120	0.0362	0.0379	0.0433	0.00120	0.0362	0.0379	0.0433

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients; *t* statistics in parentheses; robust standard errors clustered by flag id;
$^{+}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$

Table 5: Placebo analysis (2): Results of Cox regressions using outcome variable (4) "board cleaned by janitor"

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Palestine	0.431	0.477	0.485	0.518	0.760	0.752	0.748	0.721
	(-1.23)	(-1.07)	(-1.05)	(-0.99)	(-0.36)	(-0.38)	(-0.39)	(-0.45)
Germany	0.567	0.635	0.648	0.718	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*
	(-0.92)	(-0.74)	(-0.71)	(-0.56)				
Israel	1.166	1.347	1.393	1.486	2.056	2.123	2.151	2.068
	(0.30)	(0.58)	(0.65)	(0.81)	(1.19)	(1.29)	(1.32)	(1.26)
Rainbow	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	1.763	1.576	1.544	1.392
					(0.92)	(0.74)	(0.71)	(0.56)
USA	0.567	0.642	0.708	0.795	1	1.012	1.093	1.107
	(-0.92)	(-0.71)	(-0.57)	(-0.38)	(0.00)	(0.02)	(0.13)	(0.15)
Humanities		3.595	2.831	3.150		3.595	2.831	3.150
		(1.18)	(0.94)	(1.03)		(1.18)	(0.94)	(1.03)
Social/Human Sciences		0.988	0.849	1.187		0.988	0.849	1.187
		(-0.01)	(-0.11)	(0.12)		(-0.01)	(-0.11)	(0.12)
Economics		1.88e-19	1.81e-19	2.08e-19		1.88e-19	1.81e-19	2.08e-19
		(.)	(.)	(.)		(.)	(.)	(.)
Natural Sciences		*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*		*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*	*Ref. cat.*
Shared Humanities/ SocScie		4.956	3.495	3.014		4.956	3.495	3.014
		(1.15)	(0.87)	(0.74)		(1.15)	(0.87)	(0.74)
Central Facilities		3.662	2.592	3.261		3.662	2.592	3.261
		(1.23)	(0.84)	(1.00)		(1.23)	(0.84)	(1.00)
Art/Design		5.85e-20	7.91e-20	9.86e-20		5.85e-20	7.91e-20	9.86e-20
		(.)	(.)	(.)		(.)	(.)	(.)
FreqIndex			1.468	1.500			1.468	1.500
			(1.43)	(1.49)			(1.43)	(1.49)
Position high				*Ref. cat.*				*Ref. cat.*
Position Middle				0.280*				0.280*
				(-2.10)				(-2.10)
Position low				0.372*				0.372*
				(-2.22)				(-2.22)
Observations	4159	4159	4159	4159	4159	4159	4159	4159
N (flags)	600	600	600	600	600	600	600	600
N (removals)	26	26	26	26	26	26	26	26
Pseudo R2	0.0111	0.0525	0.0597	0.0756	0.0111	0.0525	0.0597	0.0756

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients; *t* statistics in parentheses; robust standard errors clustered by flag id;
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

APPENDIX

Figure A1: Examples of a rainbow flag placed in the top, middle and bottom thirds of a notice board.

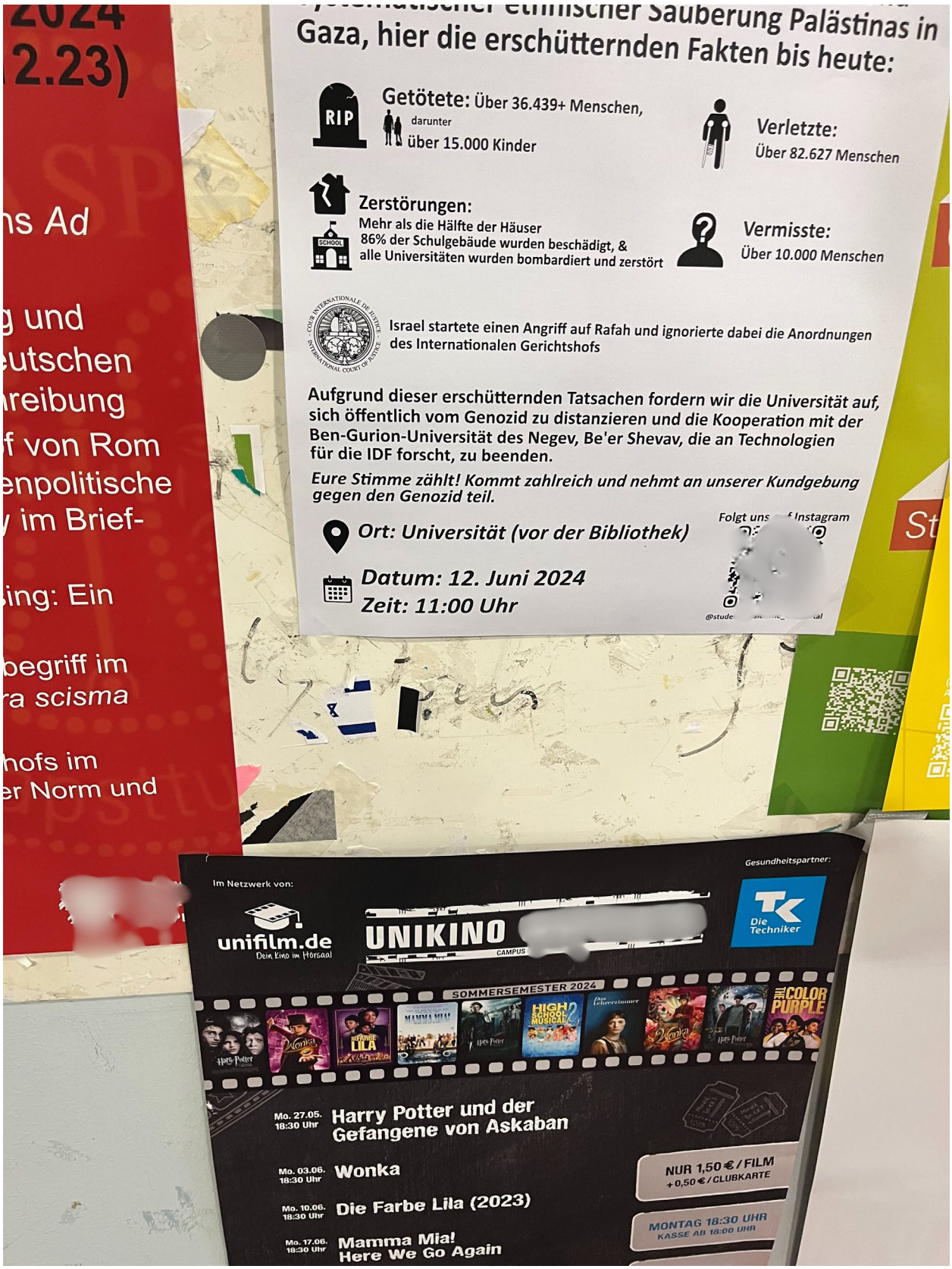

Figure A2: Remnants of an Israeli flag that has been scratched off. Visible above is a flyer promoting a “protest against the genocide“ and calling for the university to end its affiliation with Ben Gurion University.

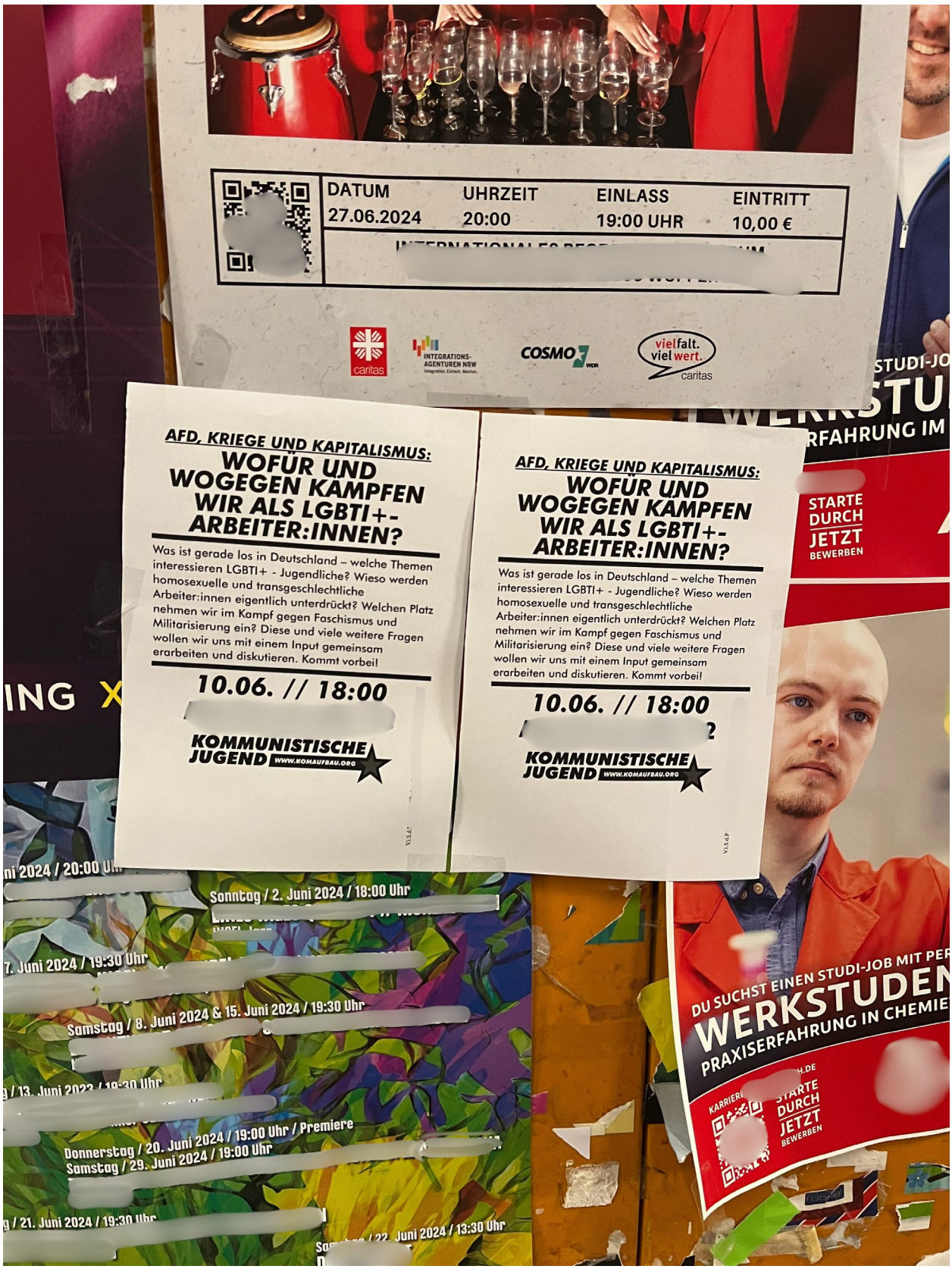

Figure A3: An American flag sticker has been covered by flyers for “Kommunistische Jugend” (Communist Youth), focusing on the challenges faced by LGBTI+ workers.

Figure A4: A rainbow and a Palestinian flag have been partially torn off the board, with the scraps being stuck on top of each other.

Figure A5: A US flag has been replaced by a sticker with a quote from Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer who died in an airstrike in Gaza in 2023.


Figure A6: An Israeli flag has been partially covered with black tape and a corner torn off another poster.

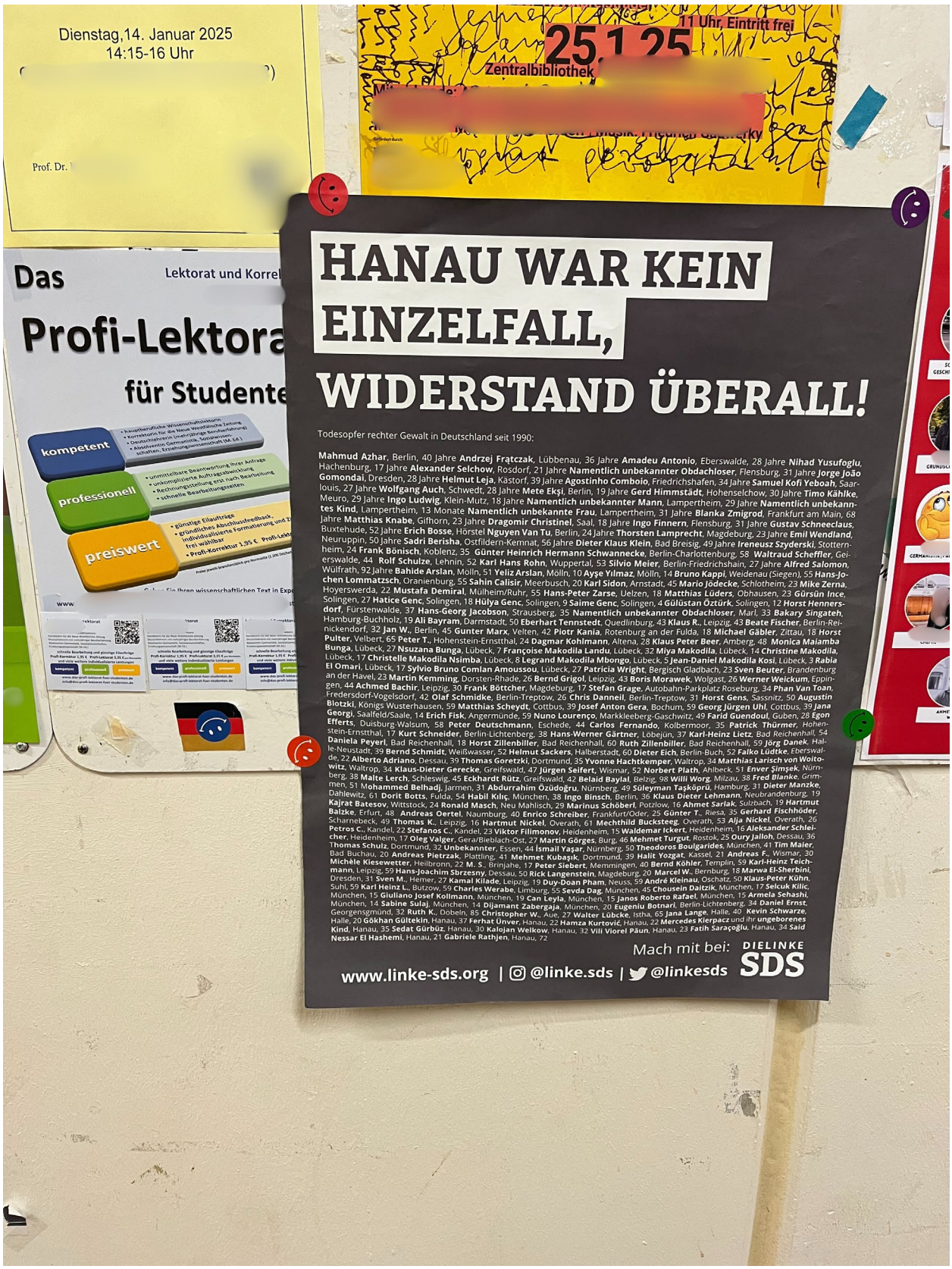

Figure A7: A German flag has been covered by a smiley face sticker. The same stickers have been used to attach a poster by a leftist student group memorializing the victims of right-wing violence in Germany.

Figure A8: An Israeli flag has been scratched off a board.