

Brief vom 12.02.2016 von CODEPINK Mitbegründerin Medea Benjamin an Frau Merk-Erbe, Oberbürgermeisterin der Stadt Bayreuth

Dear Mayor Merk-Erbe,

As the co-founder of the peace organization CODEPINK, and as a proud Jewish woman, I am disappointed to learn about the recent allegations by Benjamin Weinthal of the Jerusalem Post that CODEPINK is a so-called “anti-Semitic” organization. This accusation undoubtedly stems from our history of Palestine solidarity work, criticism of Israeli government policies, and participation in the non-violent boycott of Israeli settlement products (which are manufactured in violation of international law).

I would love the chance to talk with you personally about this. I think the best way to dispel any misgivings would be through a Skype call or a phone call. I can be reached at any time through email, via phone, or on Skype.

For now, I would first like to address the accusations against CODEPINK as an organization, and later discuss the personal attacks made on myself.

CODEPINK’s focus for many years was on ending former President Bush’s illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Then in 2009, Israel carried out Operation Cast Lead, during which over 1,400 people in Gaza were killed, including hundreds of women and children. At the behest of our allies at other human rights organizations, CODEPINK brought its first delegation to Gaza just days after the attack ended. We witnessed the utter destruction and bloody aftermath of an indiscriminate massacre that left an already traumatized population even more scarred, physically and mentally. It was this journey that deeply moved the CODEPINK leadership, including many Jewish women, to dedicate part of our mission to working for a just solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

Since then, we have taken multiple delegations to Israel and Palestine, worked with women’s groups from both countries, and committed ourselves to lifting up their stories of struggle and reconciliation. While our government purports to be working toward a just solution to the conflict, we argue that the United States cannot be an honest mediator while sending tens of billions of dollars worth of military aid to just one side of the conflict. We strongly believe that weapons deals only fuel conflicts, instead of resolving them. For these reasons, we advocate for an end to US military aid to Israel. (This campaign is not limited to Israel, we also advocate for an end to military collaboration with the repressive regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.)

At CODEPINK we oppose the use of violence to achieve freedom and liberation. When Palestinian activists put out the call for an international boycott of Israeli products as a non-violent tactic to end the occupation of Palestine, we signed on as supporters and remain proud supporters today. Our campaigns related to the larger Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement advocate for the boycott of products that are made in Israeli settlements on Palestinian land. These settlements are widely recognized as in direct violation of international law, and our call is simply for the factories to be relocated on land that is not occupied Palestinian territory. The nonviolent tactics of the BDS movement mirror those of the movement to end apartheid in South Africa, which I was once myself an active part of.

Furthermore, the allegations made by Benjamin Weinthal are based in attacks on my personal decision to attend a political conference in Iran within the last few years. I was invited to the conference to speak about my latest book on Drone Warfare, which I did. I was delighted at the opportunity to visit Iran and engage in dialogue with many Iranians. At the conference I heard speakers—mostly foreigners—say things I didn’t agree with—over-the-top conspiracy theories and statements that I thought were anti-Jewish, homophobic, and anti-immigrant. I brought up my concerns to the individual speakers and to the organizers. Some of my issues were addressed, such as clarifications from the podium by the organizers that the conference is not anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic and that it’s important to make a distinction between Judaism and Zionism. This was reiterated several times.

I was definitely uncomfortable with some of the people in the conference, but I’ve been in many situations where I feel uncomfortable with attendees from a variety of political backgrounds, from AIPAC conferences to Tea Party gatherings to Muslim Brotherhood-sponsored rallies to Thanksgiving meals with my extremely right-wing family members. I believe it’s important to talk to all kinds of people, learn their perspectives, and share mine. During the conference days I was up until the early hours of the morning engaging in heated debates with some of the attendees about their conspiracy theories, their homophobic views, and their rigid value systems. I know that some of the people at the conference were moved by our late-night discussions. This sort of “talk to anyone” strategy to bring greater peace to the world reflects my desire to see diplomacy as the primary tool used by countries to resolve conflicts. This is what motivates me, and the rest of the staff at CODEPINK— not ideology, not political affiliation, simply a desire to stop all the death and agony of war and injustice.

We were also accused by Mr. Weinthal of leading anti-Semitic chants at the protest in Washington DC. If you look at the footage, you will see that none of these chants were led by CODEPINK but by other people attending the protests, people whose speech we do not control.

It saddens me that the peace work of CODEPINK, work that we are so proud of, has been smeared by someone who knows nothing about us. We look forward to visiting your lovely city so you can see for yourself the kind of people we are—genuine, loving, compassionate, fun women determined to build a more loving, peaceful world.

Thank you so much for your attention Please feel free to forward this message to Mr. Weinthal.

In peace,
Medea Benjamin
CODEPINK co-founder