

Logbook of a researcher in sociology in times of crisis: Investigating Jews and Muslims after the 7th of October and the following days

European Journal of Cultural Studies

2025, Vol. 28(1) 121–129

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/13675494241307493

journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs



Samia Hathroubi 

Heidelberg University, Germany

Abstract

This article examines the profound impact of the 7 October 2023 events and their aftermath, particularly in the context of Jewish-Muslim relations in Europe. Drawing on personal reflections and academic research, it explores the sense of rupture experienced by individuals and organizations engaged in interfaith dialogue, emphasizing the emotional and political challenges of navigating a polarized geopolitical and intercommunal climate. The events are framed as a moment of heightened tension, intensifying long-standing narratives of conflict, particularly around antisemitism and its intersection with perceptions of Muslim communities. While these developments amplify existing dynamics, the article questions whether they represent a rupture, continuation or repetition of historical patterns. Situating this analysis within broader sociological frameworks, the article advocates for reflexive and engaged scholarship to address the complexities of identity, political discourse and social boundaries in times of crisis.

Keywords

7th of October, anti-Semitism, logbook, Gaza, Israeli-Arab conflict, Jew, Muslim, narratives, sociology

Corresponding author:

Samia Hathroubi, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany.

Email: samiahthroubi@gmail.com

The return of the elephant in the room¹

'I am angry at myself. I blame my family. I blame my friends. I blame all of us. We didn't do enough' (RTL, 2024). These powerful words of disappointment were spoken by Sabyl Ghoussoub during a morning radio show in September 2024, shortly after Israel launched a ground offensive in Lebanon. The public expression of anger and disillusionment by Ghoussoub, an acclaimed French-Lebanese writer, artist and curator, resonated with the dozens of messages, comments and discussions that I received in the days following 7 October. These came from interviewees for my dissertation project, in which I investigate how the categories Jews and Muslims are mobilized in the public sphere, first by mainstream politicians and then by Muslim and Jewish writers themselves, as well as Jewish and Muslim individuals with whom I have worked over years of engagement in Muslim-Jewish dialogue and cooperation across France and elsewhere in Europe.

The words, whether shared verbally or in writing, expressed shock, anger, disillusionment, fear and sadness.

Shock at the sheer scale of the geopolitical and national crisis.

Disillusionment with the work they had done – too little, according to some; futile, according to others; and resentment toward the positions former colleagues had taken on social media regarding the conflict.

And finally, sadness – over friendships that had faded, over bonds broken by the political stances adopted by different parties.

For all of them, 7 October and the days that followed *were felt* as a turning point.

'There is a "before" and an "after"', said one of my former interviewees, who had spent a decade engaged in a youth interfaith movement. This sense of rupture was particularly acute for those who identified as Jewish or Muslim.

These events, taken together, presented a dual challenge for me as a researcher. The first concerned my own relationship with the field: how could I make sense of an event of such monumental significance while maintaining analytical clarity? Indeed, the researcher is not a floating being, detached from context, but is also entangled in both local and transnational loyalties and therefore swept up in feelings of turmoil, much like the individuals who constitute the subject of their analysis.

The second challenge lay within the field itself, involving the individuals whose biographical trajectories I had been following since my master's studies in sociology, closely observing their public interventions and social media activities over the years.

Research in times of crisis

The events of 7 October and their aftermath not only provoked shockwaves among those directly affected by the conflict, but also raised profound questions for researchers. These moments underscored the tensions and complexities inherent in studying intercommunal relations, especially when these are deeply influenced by geopolitical crises.

In my own experience, the discourses mobilizing the ethno-religious categories of 'Jew' and 'Muslim' in France and Germany – categories central to my research – suddenly became hyper-visible in public debates, political discussions, and media narratives. The eruption of a highly polarized political and emotional climate mirrored the

broader situation in the Middle East, where the language of war has long dominated. In this context, the challenge is not only academic but deeply personal, as the boundaries between being an observer, a researcher, and a former participant in Muslim-Jewish associations, blur.

The overwhelming saturation of discourse around 'Jews' and 'Muslims' during this period created a particularly challenging atmosphere for analysis. As these identities became central to political narratives and media representation, the social realities they signify were often overshadowed by a hegemonic narrative of conflict (Everett and Gidley, 2018; Katz, 2015; Mandel, 2014). This raises a crucial question for researchers: how do we angle the dynamics of Jewish-Muslim encounters from the dominant discourse of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a narrative that, while deeply intertwined, is not synonymous with the entirety of Jewish-Muslim relations in Europe, teasubject of this special review.

For me, this turning point has broadened the scope of my questions. Beyond my initial focus on Jewish-Muslim mobilization in the public spheres in Germany and France, the question of temporality has come to the forefront: how do we interpret this specific political, geopolitical, and intercommunal moment within a larger historical trajectory? Is 7 October a rupture, a continuation, or a repetition of long-standing dynamics?

These are not merely abstract academic questions – they reflect the very real and immediate challenges of understanding relationships in flux. How do we engage with a field that is itself processing a profound rupture, where the actors I study are not only subjects of research but also individuals grappling with the emotional and political weight of this moment?

By situating this reflection within the framework of my doctoral work, I aim to navigate these questions with the epistemological vigilance advocated by Bourdieu (2003). It is often recommended that apprentice researchers, in addition to engaging with theoretical readings, offer ethical and contextual reflections on their ongoing research. Bourdieu, however, critiques this practice, referring to such texts as manifestations of a 'diary illness' – a term echoing Clifford Geertz's critique of over-personalized ethnographic accounts. Rejecting the exercise of the researcher who 'observes himself observing' and who 'limits himself to a return of transcriptions of their observations, in and through a return to the experience of the field'. Bourdieu advocates an epistemological vigilance that enables the sociologist to analyze the social position of the researcher, which can shed light on their academic attitudes toward the subject under study.

Commitment over indifference

This requires not only critical self-awareness of my position as a researcher, but also a commitment to understanding the shifting dynamics of the field itself. The events of 7 October and their aftermath have introduced a 'heat' into the discourse that demands active engagement rather than detached observation. As Carol Greenhouse (2019) suggests in his article about Donald Trump's election to the US presidency in November 2016, 'When cool indifference to the times is not tenable, is there another kind of relativity better adapted to heat?' This highlights the urgency of adopting a methodological approach that acknowledges and addresses the emotional and political intensity of the moment.

For my interviewees, the events represent an 'unprecedented crisis' that challenges existing narratives of Jewish-Muslim relations. This rupture precludes any pretense of neutrality or distance, examining scholars and participants alike to grapple with the immediacy and proximity of the moment. It calls for a reflexive engagement – one that not only analyzes the crisis but also situates itself within it, recognizing the inextricable entanglement of researcher, subject, and context.

By moving beyond indifference, my goal is to contribute meaningfully to the broader discussion, recognizing that moments of heightened emotion and urgency can also serve as opportunities for deeper understanding and transformative dialogue.

What makes a break? Recognizing a breakup

I began this article by sharing verbatim accounts from social actors about their experiences and feelings regarding 7 October, highlighting how it was perceived as a rupture. These testimonies illustrate how the events of that day constituted a defining 'break' at a micro-level (individuals or face-to-face interactions). In this section, I aim to clarify what constitutes such a rupture in this context.

Understanding rupture through sociology

While writing this piece, I came across a thought-provoking observation by French sociologist Michel Wieviorka (2009) in his article 'Sociology and the Crisis'. Although his focus is primarily on economic crises, his insights are broadly applicable. Wieviorka draws a distinction between the approaches of economists, journalists, and sociologists, stating that while the former two 'can stick to the news', sociologists must step back to determine whether a crisis has genuinely 'shifted the balance' or 'given rise to new paradigms'.

This perspective resonates with the challenges of researching Jewish-Muslim dialogue, where developments in the Middle East frequently act as a recurring variable. Such developments have a profound impact on individual interactions (micro-level) and the dynamics within interreligious organizations (meso-level). Historically, wars or geopolitical shifts have not only triggered crises for these movements but also, at times, served as catalysts for renewed commitment to engagement and dialogue.

For instance, *La Cohabitation des Dieux* offers a historical perspective on interreligious movements in France. The author AS Lamine (2015) notes,

The bilateral dialogue between Jews and Muslims has struggled to develop, despite some isolated initiatives: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict presents a significant obstacle (pp. 194–195), which can, however, be overcome in the presence of third parties. Thus, a trilateral dialogue involving Jews, Christians, and Muslims has been promoted with some success by organizations such as the Brotherhood of Abraham, established in 1967.

The events of 7 October fit within this historical framework. Rather than signifying a paradigm shift, they represent an intensification of existing tensions and dynamics. It is, however, still too early to assess their medium- or long-term effects on biographical

trajectories and the evolution of interreligious movements. Future research could explore whether this period has reinforced the 'paradigm of conflictuality' between Jews and Muslims described by scholars such as Everett and Gidley (2018), or deepened the symbolic boundaries between these communities.

Rupture, unprecedented events, and preliminary reflections

Another piece that shaped my reflections is Catherine Hass' (2023) article in the online magazine *Terms*. In '7 October Sequence: Making a date differently', Hass begins by arguing that the events of 7 October and their aftermath constituted a rupture. Drawing on Derrida's reflections on 9/11, she parallels the two events, highlighting their unprecedented nature. Derrida, as she notes, examined how such events are 'felt, in an apparently immediate way, as a striking, singular event', while also recognizing the inherent difficulty of conceptualizing an event in its immediacy:

Derrida thus analyzes many of the difficulties inherent in thinking about the event, whether in terms of its naming [. . .] the difficulties of 'distinguishing between the supposedly raw fact, the impression, and the interpretation'[. . .] or the way in which 9/11 affected the 'geopolitical unconscious of all living people.'

While Derrida's framework is compelling for describing 7 October, as Hass suggests, it remains challenging to characterize political sequences as 'unprecedented' because such judgments are always made retrospectively. Time and distance from the events are essential for proper analysis.

With this in mind, I offer some preliminary reflections and attempted hypotheses here, particularly focusing on two aspects: political responses and the rise of antisemitism.

Continuities and discontinuities: political responses

At first glance, the immediate reactions to 7 October seem to echo familiar patterns. Anyone researching Jewish-Muslim relations in Europe will have encountered the recurring formula of the 'risk of importing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict'. This phrase, frequently invoked by European politicians or interreligious leaders seeking to preserve 'social peace', implies that tensions in the Middle East risk sparking inter-ethnic clashes in France.

This rhetoric resurfaced in the French President's televised address on 12 October 2023. It can also be read in the joint article signed by a rabbi and an imam in Great Britain entitled 'As an imam and a rabbi, we see the pain caused by war in the Middle East. We don't want that conflict in the UK'.²

Such statements underline a continuity in the political framing of Jewish-Muslim relations, where geopolitical events in the Middle East are repeatedly tied to domestic intercommunal dynamics.

However, distinguishing between continuity and discontinuity, between recurrence and singularity, remains a complex task. Political moments often crystallize processes

already underway rather than creating change overnight. One such crystallization appears to be the reconfiguration of the fight against antisemitism in France, which the events of 7 October have accelerated.

Debates around antisemitism

Following 7 October, there was a sharp increase in anti-Semitic acts in France. According to the French Ministry of the Interior, as of 14 November 2023, a total of 1518 antisemitic acts or remarks had been recorded since 7 October, compared to 436 for the entirety of 2022 and 974 in 2004, previously the record year (Le Monde, 2023).

In media and political discourse, this surge in antisemitism was quickly framed within the long-standing narrative of 'Muslim antisemitism', a framing that emerged in debates during the early 2000s (Drai, 2001 ; Finkielkraut, 2003 ; Taguieff, 2004 ; Trigano, 2003). For instance, in late October 2023, Arno Klarsfeld (2023), a lawyer for the French association Sons and Daughters of Jewish Deportees, attributed the rise in antisemitism to a 'Muslim minority that is active' and described Muslims as a security risk for Jews in France. Such statements reflect an intensification of this narrative in public discourse. To a certain extent we can see the same pattern within the speech of the German Vice-Chancellor, Robert Habeck (2023), who, in a speech addressed to "Muslims living here" (not as fellow citizens) in Germany, urged them to dissociate themselves from anti-Semitism as such, and to do so in a clear and unequivocal way. This discourse casts suspicion on all Muslims. In one of his statements, he conditions the right of Muslims to tolerance with the need to distance themselves from antisemitism.

Symbolic borders and anti-Semitism

The party's presence at the march, led by Marine Le Pen, of the National Rally (hence RN), the new name of the Front National 'founded in 1972 as a kind of umbrella *organization* for all extreme right-wing tendencies' (Camus, 2022) by Jean-Marie le Pen, who has been convicted several times for anti-Semitism, ³ was a real turning point. In his article, Jean Yves Camus shows the evolution of Marine le Pen and other extreme right-wing figures in relation to anti-Semitism and Israel. He points out that 'on 1st March 2017 Marine Le Pen did not hesitate to present herself as a "bulwark" against Islamism for Jews whom she declared to be "in danger" in their own country, and even urged them to join the FN to fight Islamism'. This shift in balance was encapsulated in the words of RN deputy Sébastien Chenu (RN) in an interview on 13 November 2023: 'A young Jew risks his skin more in an Islamist environment, for example in Seine-Saint-Denis, than in a Rassemblement National demonstration' (Écho d'Île-de-France, 2023). There's a shift from a broad characterization of animosity to a more specific framing of Muslims and Islam as the singular threats to Jews. The reconfiguration of the political spectrum, in which the RN becomes 'normal', is reinforced. Antisemitism appears as a symbolic border that allows its leaders to integrate the 'republican arc', a phrase widely used before the demonstration.

A dotted line in conclusion

The events of 7 October and their aftermath offer fertile ground for exploring the intersections of politics, intercommunal relations and identity in contemporary Europe. While it is too soon to draw definitive conclusions about their long-term implications, they have undoubtedly intensified existing tensions, reshaped political discourses and challenged the frameworks through which Jewish-Muslim relations are understood.

This moment of rupture exemplifies what Carol Greenhouse (2019) describes as a 'temporal crisis', where 'rupture does not defy time [. . .] so much as it renders time plural, kaleidoscopic, and probabilistic'. 7 October represents more than an isolated event; it is a collision of historical grievances, immediate reactions and uncertain futures. The resulting temporal complexity demands an approach that accounts for these layered dynamics – recognizing how past narratives influence present actions and future possibilities.

In this state of flux, the challenge for scholars is not merely to document the events or analyze their impacts but to actively engage with the transformations they produce. Understanding the present as a site of overlapping and competing temporalities opens pathways for a nuanced exploration of Jewish-Muslim relations and the broader socio-political landscapes they inhabit.

As researchers and participants in these unfolding narratives, our role is not to draw definitive lines but to trace the dotted ones – marking connections, disconnections and the spaces in between. In doing so, we not only respond to the crisis but also contribute to a dialogue that seeks to illuminate pathways toward a more inclusive and reflexive understanding of coexistence in times of rupture.

Data availability statement

No new data was created from this study, which is based on newspaper articles, secondary data, social media data, which are publicly available.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Samia Hathroubi  <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8582-0277>

Notes

1. The expression 'the elephant in the room' refers, in Jewish-Muslim circles, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is often ignored or set aside.
2. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/dec/02/imam-rabbi-israel-pal-estine-war-middle-east-uk> (accessed 5 December 2023).

3. *Libération* (2023) Available at: https://www.liberation.fr/politique/extreme-droite-quand-jean-marie-le-pen-etait-condamne-pour-antisemitisme-insidieux-20231110_QF2BDR4FGBG-N3PQOF47WN6Y7NI/ (accessed 5 December 2023).

References

- Bourdieu P (2003) Participant objectification. In: Bourdieu P, Mhammeri M and Bensa A, et al. (eds) *Proceedings of Social Science Research 2003/5 (No. 150)*. Paris:Éditions Le Seuil, pp.43–58.
- Camus J (2022) III. The French Far Right, Israel and the Jews since 1945. In: Allouche-Benayoun J (ed.) *Contemporary Anti-Semitism in France: Remains or Emergences?* Paris:Hermann, pp.77–93.
- Drai R (2001) *Under the Sign of Zion: The New Anti-Semitism Has Arrived*. Paris:Michalon.
- Everett SS and Gidley B (2018) Getting away from the noise: Jewish-Muslim interactions and narratives in E1/Barbès. *Francospheres* 7: 173–196.
- Finkelkraut A (2003) *In the Name of the Other: Reflections on Coming Anti-Semitism*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Greenhouse C (2019) Times like the present: Political rupture and the heat of the moment. In: Holbraad M, Kapferer B and Sauma JF(eds) *Ruptures: Anthropologies of Discontinuity in Times of Turmoil*. London:UCL Press, p.70–92.
- Hass C (2023) Notes on the sequence opened by 7 October 2023. Available at:<https://revue-conditions.com/faire>(accessed 7 December).
- Katz EB (2015) *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France*. Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press.
- Lamine AS (2015) *The cohabitation of gods: religious plurality and secularism*. Paris:Puf.
- Mandel MS (2014) *Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict*. Princeton, NJ:Princeton University Press.
- Taguieff PA (2004) *Rising from the Muck: The New Anti-Semitism in Europe* (trans. P Camiller). Chicago, IL:Ivan R. Dee.
- Trigano S (2003) *The Resignation of the Republic: Jews and Muslims in France*. Paris:Presses Universitaires de France.
- Wieviorka M (2009) Sociology and the crisis: What crisis, and what sociology? *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 127:181–198.

Articles, Newspapers, Videos:

- CNews (2023) Klarsfeld: "It is an anti-Semitism that comes essentially from a part of the Muslim population." Available at: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8p8974> (accessed December 2023).
- Echo of Île-de-France (2023) Socialists protest against Sébastien Chenu's remarks . Available at: <https://www.echoidf.fr/2023/11/15/les-socialistes-selevent-contre-les-propos-de-sebastien-chenu/> (accessed 5 December 2023).
- Habeck (2023) Muslims living here are entitled to protection from right-wing extremist violence – and rightly so . Video . Available at: <https://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/DE/Videos/2023-some/231101-israel-und-antisemitismus/video.html> (accessed 3 December 2023).
- Le Monde (2023) Anti-Semitism: 1,518 acts recorded since October 7, 2023 . Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2023/11/15/antisemitisme-1-518-actes-recenses-depuis-le-7-octobre-peu-de-condamnations_6200221_3224.html (accessed 5 December 2023).

- Le Monde (2023) Israel/Hamas War, Macron calls on the French to remain united . Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2023/10/12/guerre-israel-amas-emmanuel-macron-appelle-les-francais-a-rester-unis-pour-porter-un-message-de-paix-et-de-securite-pour-le-proche-orient_6194038_823448.html (accessed 5 December 2023).
- RTL (2024) LEBANON: Sabyl Ghossoub, Franco-Lebanese writer and journalist, is the guest of Amandine Bégot . Available at: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x96a0vk> (accessed 16 November 2024).
- The Guardian (2023) Article published 2nd December 2023 . Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/dec/02/imam-rabbi-israel-palestine-war-middle-east-uk> (accessed 5 December 2023).

Biographical note

Samia Hathroubi is a sociologist at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, pursuing a PhD that explores the mobilization of Jewish and Muslim identities in the public spaces of France and Germany. Her dissertation is part of the Freigeist project: "Invisible Architects: Jews, Muslims, and the Construction of Europe" led by Dr Elisabeth Becker. Additionally, she serves as a board member of the Democracy & Belonging Forum at the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley. Her scholarly contributions include: 1. "Why think about the question of links between Jews and Muslims?" (S. Hathroubi, 2015) - 2. "Learning the Language of the Other? Hebrew and Arabic in Two Parisian Associations" (S. Hathroubi, 2022).