

Chapter 5: How do Jews living in Germany experience and interpret political-Islamist antisemitism?

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1. Background

Antisemitism is a ‘collective action problem’ (Reimer-Gordinskaya and Tzschiesche 2021, p. 34) that Jewish individuals face daily. Anticipating antisemitic incidents, deciding how to respond, and making sense of those experiences are inescapable challenges for Jews and can have serious consequences for their everyday lives and well-being.

Political-Islamist antisemitism (PIA) has emerged as a major social challenge and is now a focal point of public debate and research. Many Jewish victims attribute antisemitic acts to Muslim perpetrators and report that they perceive an increased threat from Muslim communities in recent years (Zick et al. 2017).

These findings reflect a long-running debate over whether and to what extent contemporary German antisemitism should be understood as a ‘Muslim problem’ (Öztürk and Pickel 2023). In this debate, researchers (e.g. Arnold 2018) rightly question the projective framing of ‘imported antisemitism’ with reference to the history of European and especially German antisemitism and the current prevalence of antisemitic attitudes in all social milieus. At the same time, research on antisemitism shows that antisemitism among Muslims has been widespread since long before the events in Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent global wave of antisemitism (Salzborn 2020; Jikeli 2019; Öztürk and Pickel 2022; Fischer and Wetzels 2024).

The study presented here builds on previous analyses of Jewish perspectives on antisemitism among Muslims and focuses on the following key questions:

- (1) How do Jews experience antisemitism that they attribute to Muslim perpetrators in relation to antisemitism that they attribute to other perpetrators?
- (2) How widespread are experiences of political-Islamist antisemitism and what criteria influence ‘Islamically’ motivated antisemitism?

2. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was chosen to explore experiences of antisemitism in everyday life and how individuals cope with them. Between October 2021 and February 2023, 21 qualitative problem-centred interviews were conducted with Jews, in which the interviewees were asked to talk about their recent everyday experiences with antisemitism and to describe incidents that had been particularly memorable for them. The interviews were analysed using a Grounded Theory approach.

The study drew on a phenomenologically oriented sociology of knowledge, based on the work of Schütz (1974). The approach emphasises subjective experiences within an intersubjectively shared social world. According to this approach, in everyday life we reciprocally assume that others understand the world in a manner comparable to our own. However, confrontation with antisemitism can make Jews realise that their counterparts interpret the shared world very differently – namely, through conscious or unconscious recourse to antisemitic narratives – and accordingly treat others differently. This also calls into question the assumption that everyday life—perceived as given—will continue to unfold in the future just as it does today, and that we will be able to influence it tomorrow in the same manner as we do now. The sudden intrusion of antisemitism into daily life can profoundly unsettle these certainties. antisemitism

In addition, a quantitative online survey was conducted between May 2022 and February 2023 to determine how widespread experiences with the PIA phenomenon and related perceptions are. The 295 participants were recruited via the email lists of Jewish communities, the ELES Jewish student services organisation and an advertisement on the website of the *Jüdische Allgemeine* newspaper. Participants were asked about their general understanding of antisemitism, their experiences with PIA, and the reasons for interpreting an act as ‘Islamically motivated’.

A survey experiment was also conducted to examine the role that attributing radicalism plays in problem perception and an increased sense of threat. For this purpose, two experimental groups of approximately equal size were randomly selected from the sample. The first group answered questions about ‘Muslims,’ while the second answered questions about ‘radical Muslims.’ Three problem levels were differentiated: antisemitism as a general problem among (radical) Muslims, a general threat to Jews from (radical) Muslims, and a personal threat or concrete fear of (radical) Muslims. The latter has the greatest impact on the individual lives of the respondents and therefore requires more practical engagement.

3. Key Findings

Interview study on experiences of antisemitism among affected persons

For many Jews, antisemitism is an everyday reality that influences their perception of safety, participation, and self-determination. The interviews reveal that the recent emphasis put on Muslim antisemitism by researchers and the public (Zick et al. 2017; Bundesverband RIAS 2023a, 2023b) is not reflected in the experiences of those potentially affected. For the interviewees, the experience of Muslim antisemitism is structurally identical to other experiences of antisemitism. The potential experience of PIA is part of an everyday reality in which Jews are exposed to antisemitic insults and attacks in very different areas and by very different groups of people.

The analysis of interview passages about experiences of confrontation with antisemitism shows that three core constraints emerge when facing antisemitism:

First, Jews experience that the predictability of antisemitism is limited. Although there are situations in everyday life in which respondents can prepare themselves for possible experiences of antisemitism—for example, in the context of anti-Israel demonstrations or in the comment sections on social media platforms—Jews can still encounter antisemitism in situations where they would not have expected it.

Second, confrontation with antisemitism forces Jews to adjust their everyday priorities and deal with issues and threats that they have not chosen themselves. This forced interaction creates immediate pressure to act and disrupts daily routines. Finally, as the confrontation progresses, a limitation of the ability to act becomes apparent: the possibility of actively defending oneself against anti-Semitism is highly dependent on the context. Factors such as the behaviour of bystanders, the immediacy of the interaction, the degree of anonymity in the interaction, and power relations between those involved play a decisive role.

Online survey on the prevalence of experiences with political-Islamist antisemitism

Approximately 29% of respondents reported having experienced ‘Islamic’ antisemitism within the last 10 years. In contrast, approximately 39% of respondents reported experiencing exclusively non-Islamic antisemitism and 33% reported no antisemitism at all. Breaking down incidents by type (threat/insult, vandalism, physical violence) uncovers distinct patterns. Among those respondents who had experienced antisemitic threats and insults (67.5%), 38% stated that the driving force behind these acts was rooted in Islam. A right-wing motive was suspected in 24% of cases, a left-wing motive in 6%, and a Christian motive in 2%. In cases of antisemitic property damage or vandalism, those affected believe that an Islamic motive was present in 37% of incidents, with a right-wing motive suspected in 37% of cases as well. In cases of physical attacks, 57% of those affected report that these acts were Islamically motivated, compared to 17% who suspected a right-wing motive.

The attribution of an Islamic motive is based on several factors: 77.4% of respondents name the remarks made by the perpetrators as the decisive criterion, 61.9% refer to the language they spoke, and 57.1% to their physical appearance. Contextual factors such as location (e.g. at pro-Palestinian demonstrations) and timing (e.g. escalations of the Middle East conflict) play a less significant role.

The results of the experiment show that respondents on each of the three levels perceive radical Muslims as significantly more threatening or problematic than ‘Muslims’ in general. In addition, the threat perception decreases with increasing proximity to one’s personal life. While 30% attribute a high level of threat to ‘Muslims’ in general, the figure rises to 66% for ‘radical Muslims’. The difference is even more pronounced in the personal threat perception, which is less pronounced overall: 6.5% of respondents say they are afraid of ‘Muslims’, while 46% say they are afraid of ‘radical Muslims’ (‘agree completely’ responses).

Respondents thus clearly distinguish between ‘Muslims’ and ‘radical Muslims’ in terms of their problem and threat perceptions in relation to PIA, especially when it comes to their personal sense of threat, which This, in turn, is generally less pronounced than the general problem perception and the general threat perception.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study shows that antisemitism is an everyday threat for Jews, one that can arise unexpectedly, and which quickly demands practical action, with the reactions of bystanders being crucial to maintaining one’s ability to act. Regarding political-Islamist antisemitism specifically, it appears that perpetrators are identified primarily by characteristics perceived as Islamic— with perceived radicalism being the principal marker for feeling threatened.

Since it has not been conclusively clarified whether the acts that cause the perceived threat are actually committed by ideologically motivated perpetrators, further mixed-method studies are recommended to explore the understanding of the term ‘political Islam’ among Jews.

Civic education should prioritise Jewish perspectives on antisemitism. Specifically, it should be highlighted that Jews view antisemitism as a societal issue arising from multiple sources, with radicalised Islamist antisemitism as a key component of this threat. If the wider public likewise regards antisemitism as a practical concern for all, it will facilitate meaningful support for those being confronted with it daily. ■

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Chapter 6: Between Distrust and the Hope for Recognition: Interactions in the Relations Between the State, Society, and Muslims

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1. Background

The research project “Interactions of Islamist Radicalisation in Social and Political Contexts” (WECHSELWIRKUNGEN) was grounded in the conviction that radicalisation and radicalism emerge from a web of interacting, mutually influencing forces. In short, from a network of reciprocal relationships that shape the complex, dynamic entity called “society.”

To move beyond approaches that examine only one side of radicalisation processes, the project placed the Muslim perspective at its centre. It asked: What effects do legislative measures or administrative actions taken in the name of counterterrorism have on fundamental and human rights? How do media discourses and societal discrimination influence the attitudes of Muslims? How do Muslims perceive state interventions and political discourse in specific areas, such as Islamic Religious Education? How do they navigate confrontations with “critics of Islam” in urban settings? How do they negotiate forms of (devout) Islamic life in Germany, whether in Facebook groups or through ritual sermons?

The aim was to identify potential sources and contributing factors that might nourish the often-diffuse grounds for radicalisation among Muslims, while also seeking to understand factors that foster Muslim resilience against radicalisation. This contribution examines various facets of these interdependencies—between Muslims and Muslim organisations and both state and civil society actors—across different fields of practice and discourse, and at varying levels.

2. Methodology

The study was multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary, with research sites located in both western and eastern Germany. Data sources were diverse: legal texts and court rulings, Facebook discussions, sermons, participant observation, individual and group interviews, facilitated role-playing exercises, online-experiments, and meta-analyses of survey data within a mixed-methods design. The analysis covered national, European, and international levels, as well as individual perspectives and collective attitudes.

To assess whether and to what extent preventive counter-terrorism measures cast a wide net, impacting not only terror suspects but the fundamental and human rights of Muslims in general, the project examined both national and international dimensions, focusing particularly on EU and UN sanctions. The legal analysis encompassed relevant German and European legislation, UN Security Council resolutions, and key rulings of German administrative courts, the Federal Constitutional Court, the European Court of Human Rights, and the Court of Justice of the European Union.

An online experiment with 135 participants explored how discrimination influences political trust. Specifically, whether information about discrimination against Muslim women in the labour market spills over and affects Muslims’ trust in political institutions. To contextualise and differentiate the experimental findings, seven focus-group discussions were conducted in two waves (October 2021–June 2022 and late January 2024). Each group comprised three to seven people who, in everyday life, are perceived as Muslim to varying degrees. In addition, a systematic *scoping review* mapped the current state of research on how discrimination shapes civic engagement intentions among people with a migration background, including Muslims.