

Do Antizionist Beliefs Predict Justification of Anti-Jewish Aggression? Evidence from Two National Surveys in Norway

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While perpetrators of anti-Jewish harassment and violence are a small minority in democratic societies, they rely on a larger number of people who justify such aggression or silently condone it. Using data from nationally representative surveys of the Norwegian population, I report two studies investigating whether antizionist beliefs predict (1) justification of harassment and violence against Jews and (2) refusal to take a stance against such aggression. Study 1 (N = 1575) found support for both hypotheses. In a preregistered replication, Study 2 (N = 1653) confirmed these results. Follow-up analyses found that antizionist beliefs also predicted refusal to answer questions measuring blatant antisemitic prejudice. The findings support theorizing that sees antizionism as a subtle and socially more acceptable vehicle for expressing antisemitic hostility.

Keywords: antisemitism, antizionism, prejudice, aggression, Norway

Public Significance Statement

This research found that antizionist beliefs, or hostility toward the Jewish state, are associated with justifying harassment and violence against Jews and refusal to take a stance against such aggression. The results indicate that, for many people, antizionist rhetoric provides a socially acceptable way to express and legitimize antisemitic hostility.

Introduction

“Both of my children have been harassed [...] they beat my son with a stick while shouting, ‘I hate Israel.’”

– Testimony of a Norwegian Jewish parent on experiences following October 7, 2023 (Strand, 2023).

Antisemitic hostility has increased in the 21st century, leading to fear and safety concerns among Jewish communi-

ties in many countries (Enstad, 2017, 2024; EUMC, 2004; FRA, 2013; FRA, 2018). This trend was underscored by the sharp rise in anti-Jewish aggression following the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent war (Freedman et al., 2024; Reuters, 2023). Such a pattern, with flare-ups in the Israel/Palestine conflict followed by a rise in violence and harassment targeting Jews outside the conflict area, is by now a familiar finding in the literature on contemporary antisemitism (Feinberg, 2020; LaFreniere Tamez et al., 2024; Smith, 2008; Vergani et al., 2021).

It is well known from research on intergroup relations that acts of aggression against outgroup members do not occur in a vacuum; perpetrators of such acts tend to rely on a broader environment of people who morally justify them (Fiske & Rai, 2015; Struch & Schwartz, 1989). Research on bystander behavior finds that collective responses to hate crimes are powerful signals, as they can affect the damage done by indicating either a permissive or a disapproving social norm (Zapata et al., 2024). While direct witnesses to hate crimes may be few, a larger population of indirect bystanders can influence the social climate by how they justify, condone, or condemn such aggression. Hence, understanding the factors associated with justification of outgroup aggression is important. To date, this question has received scant attention in social and behavioral research on antisemitism. In the present research, I address this gap by examining the extent to which antizionist beliefs (i.e., enmity toward the Jewish state and its supporters) are predictive of justification of anti-Jewish aggression or refusal to take a stance against it.

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Study 2 was preregistered at OSF. Analysis code and supplementary materials are deposited at OSF. Raw data can be accessed from *Sikt* (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research) at <https://doi.org/10.18712/NSD-NSD2879-V3> and <https://doi.org/10.18712/NSD-NSD3151-V1>. The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. This research was supported by the Research Council of Norway through grant no. 302297.

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Justification of Outgroup Aggression

Why do some people attack and denigrate outgroup members? Any explanation needs to consider the role of the social environment in offering justification and moral support for such acts. Moral motives structure much human interaction (Rai & Fiske, 2011), including violence and aggression. In a broad-ranging survey of research on violent practices across the globe, Fiske and Rai (2015) found that most perpetrators of violence are morally motivated in the sense that they act with reference to moral codes and convictions that are shared by the ingroup. For example, extremist and terrorist violence, even when perpetrated by “lone wolves”, tends to be inspired by narratives of justification shared by wider groups (Berntzen & Sandberg, 2014; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). For aggressors to feel that they are “doing the right thing,” the presence of a social environment that supports, permits, or condones violence against the outgroup is essential. Without a meaningful expectation of external justification, the bar for committing aggressive acts will likely be much higher.

To understand why people justify outgroup aggression, research on the psychology of conflict has stressed the importance of a conflict-supporting mindset (Saguy & Reifentagar, 2022). Essential manifestations of such a mindset are prejudiced beliefs and exclusionary convictions that portray the outgroup’s narratives and self-understandings as illegitimate or unworthy of moral concern. Whether and how such prejudice and exclusionary convictions are expressed, however, is strongly governed by social norms. Research has found consistent correlations between people’s expressed prejudice and their perceptions of what constitutes socially acceptable expressions of prejudice (Crandall et al., 2002). According to the justification-suppression model of prejudice, “genuine” prejudices are often not expressed directly but are restrained and suppressed by salient norms (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). These insights underpin the broader distinction between blatant and subtle prejudice that has characterized much research on prejudice in recent decades (Jones et al., 2016; Operario & Fiske, 2001; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Stanke et al., 2024; Tarman & Sears, 2005). Against this background, when seeking to explain justification of outgroup aggression it appears crucial to investigate the potential role of subtle prejudice in making individuals more likely to openly support or silently condone such acts, and less likely to challenge them.

Antizionism and Antisemitism as Subtle and Blatant Prejudice

In the context of contemporary anti-Jewish hostility, it can be expected that blatant, traditional antisemitic prejudice makes people more likely to justify aggression against Jews. However, there is a strong social norm against expressions of

blatant antisemitic prejudice in liberal democracies, and such attitudes appear to have been declining over time in Western Europe and North America (J. E. Cohen, 2018; Enstad, 2023; Staetsky, 2017; Watts, 1997). From this perspective, the 21st century rise in antisemitic incidents and the increasing pressure felt in Jewish communities may appear puzzling: How can antisemitic hostility be increasing if the attitudes are declining? A possible explanation is that blatant forms of antisemitic prejudice have become socially stigmatized in democratic societies, and thus no longer serve as adequate indicators of underlying antisemitic hostility due to social desirability bias (Jikeli, 2018; Krumpal, 2013). Instead, such hostility might be expressed in more subtle and socially acceptable ways, particularly as *antizionist* or strongly anti-Israel beliefs (Cohen-Abady et al., 2016).

Antizionism in this context is understood as different from regular criticism of Israeli policies or practices. By framing the Jewish state (and no other nation-state) as an illegitimate enterprise and a malignant force, antizionism portrays Israel as inherently immoral (Oxman, 2018). A prominent and recurring theme in antizionist rhetoric and symbolism is the comparison with Nazi Germany, invoking a moral equivalence between Israeli actions and Nazi atrocities (Tabarovsky, 2022). By thus portraying the Jewish state and those who support its existence as akin to the Nazi regime and its adherents, antizionism creates a moral framework in which anti-Jewish aggression can be perceived as an act of righteous resistance against evil (Hirsh, 2018; Jaspal, 2016, 2023).

While objections have been made to the idea that antisemitic prejudice can be expressed through beliefs about Israel (Klug, 2013; Romeyn, 2020), a growing body of research has resulted in empirical findings that show a consistent correlation between anti-Israel and anti-Jewish attitudes (Allington, 2022; Allington & Hirsh, 2019; Baum & Nakazawa, 2007; F. Cohen et al., 2009; Hirsh, 2018; Kaplan & Small, 2006; Staetsky, 2017, 2020). Investigating individual- and country-level predictors of antisemitic victimization among Jews in 12 EU countries, Enstad (2024) found that negative opinion of Israel on the country level was strongly and independently (controlling for levels of blatant antisemitic prejudice, far-right voting, and economic decline) associated with an elevated probability of experiencing antisemitic harassment and violence. While most of this literature consists of cross-sectional studies that do not formally establish causality, a notable recent study by Binstok et al. (2024) analyzed social media and survey data and, using an instrumental variable approach, found support for a causal interpretation of such correlations: negative views about Jews affected people’s views about Israel. Taken together, these findings strengthen the proposition that antizionist or anti-Israel views can serve as a subtle substitute for “old”, blatant Jew-hatred, in much the same way that subtle, “symbolic” racism can re-

place traditional, blatant expressions of the same underlying hostile sentiment (Sears, 1988; Sears & Henry, 2005).

Based on these considerations, I derive two main hypotheses. First, antizionist beliefs are expected to predict justification of anti-Jewish aggression, above and beyond blatant antisemitic prejudice. Second, based on the proposition that antizionist beliefs serve as a socially acceptable way to express underlying antisemitic hostility, they are also expected to predict refusal to take a stance against anti-Jewish aggression. The reasoning for the second hypothesis is that prevailing social norms against expressing blatant prejudice may lead individuals to avoid explicitly justifying aggression while also feeling uncomfortable condemning it, so that refusal to answer the question of justification becomes a way out that satisfies both their social desirability concerns and their underlying prejudice. Such a dynamic would align with broader research on prejudice suppression, which finds that people tend to navigate normative constraints strategically by expressing underlying biases in socially more desirable ways (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003).

The Present Research

I report two studies that seek to advance our understanding of the relationship between antizionist beliefs and antisemitic prejudice. Moving beyond the well-documented insight that attitudes toward Israel and attitudes toward Jews tend to be correlated, I focus on a crucial but understudied question: whether antizionist beliefs predict justification of aggressive behavior toward Jews and refusal to take a stance against such aggression. I draw on survey data from Norway, collected in two waves in 2017 and 2022 as part of a project led by the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies to investigate the Norwegian population's attitudes toward Jews and Muslims (Hoffmann & Moe, 2017; Moe, 2023). In Study 1, I use data from a nationally representative survey fielded in January–April 2017 ($n = 1,575$). In Study 2, which was preregistered prior to accessing the data, I draw on a subsequent wave of the same survey, fielded in November 2021–February 2022 ($n = 1,653$). In both studies, I also explore whether the hypothesized associations hold for separate samples of Muslims with an immigrant background ($n = 586$ and 821), a group for whom prior research indicates that both anti-Jewish and anti-Israel attitudes tend to be more widespread than in the general population (Jikeli, 2015a, 2015b; Koopmans, 2015; Moe, 2023; Staetsky, 2020).

Study 1

Materials and Methods

I used data from a 2017 survey of attitudes toward Jews and Muslims in Norway, which included a population sample and a sample of Muslims of immigrant background (Hoffmann & Moe, 2017). The population survey was conducted

electronically using Kantar TNS' access panel consisting of 55,000 individuals aged 18 or above. Participants were pre-stratified and selected based on education, gender, age, and geography to ensure a nationally representative sample. The total sample size was 1,575. Kantar TNS calculated weights to correct for slight biases observed in the final sample relating to geographical region and education level.

The Muslim sample consisted of individuals aged 18 to 75 with an immigrant background from Muslim-majority countries, either immigrants or their descendants. The sample, drawn from the National Population Register, was stratified based on historical response rates to ensure proportional representation by country background. The total sample size was 828 respondents, 586 of whom identified as Muslim. Further details about samples and response rates are reported in Hoffmann and Moe (2017).

To measure antizionist beliefs, I used an item asking respondents to indicate how well the following statement fit with their views: "Israel treats the Palestinians just as badly as the Jews were treated during World War II." Response options were "Not at all", "Rather badly", "Rather well", "Completely", and "Impossible to answer". The variable was factorized, with "Not at all" as the reference level.

For the outcome measure, I used the following item: "Considering how Israel treats the Palestinians, harassment and violence against Jews are justifiable." Response options again included "Not at all", "Rather badly", "Rather well", "Completely", and "Impossible to answer". A categorical variable was computed with the categories "Not justifiable" (reference), "Justifiable", and "Refusal to answer", which enabled analyzing both outcomes—justification of aggression and refusal to answer—within a single model.

I estimated multinomial regression models for the population sample and the Muslim sample separately. For each sample, I report three models: first, a baseline model with antizionist beliefs only; second, a model with control variables including pro-Palestine (vs. pro-Israel) views, higher education, and gender; and third, a full model that additionally controls for explicitly anti-Jewish attitudes (high vs. low). This variable is a dichotomized variant of a four-point index constructed by combining three indices measuring (1) traditional prejudice against Jews (e.g., "Jews largely have themselves to blame for being persecuted"), (2) social distance (e.g., rejecting Jews as neighbors), and (3) dislike of Jews.¹ In the models, data are weighted using the weighting variable supplied by the survey authors.

The models analyzing the Muslim samples included additional controls for discrimination experiences (an index capturing feelings of exclusion, avoidance by others, harassment, and unfair treatment due to religious identity) and re-

¹For further details about these indices and validation results, see Hoffmann and Moe (2017).

ligiosity (a composite measure of the importance of religion and adherence to religious rules, $\alpha = .88$).

Results

Summary statistics for the population sample on the outcome, predictor, and control variables are presented in Supplemental Table S1. A substantial minority of the respondents (12%) affirmed that “harassment and violence against Jews are justifiable” when considering Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, indicating that this statement reflects their views “completely” or “somewhat well”. Furthermore, 26% declined to answer the question, selecting “impossible to answer”. Notably, no more than 38% of respondents unequivocally rejected the statement (“Does not reflect my views at all”). Approximately 33% agreed with the statement comparing Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians to the Nazi atrocities during WWII, suggesting that antizionist beliefs reflect a widely shared societal norm in the Norwegian context. A large majority of respondents (85%) did not express explicitly anti-Jewish attitudes.

Did antizionist beliefs predict justification of aggression and refusal to answer? Multinomial models (see Figure 1 and Supplemental Table S2) revealed that antizionist beliefs were strongly linked to a higher likelihood of both justifying anti-Jewish aggression and refusing to take a stance against it. This association persisted after controlling for pro-Palestine sympathies, higher education, and gender in Model 2, and was slightly attenuated after adding a control for anti-Jewish attitudes in Model 3. Focusing on the full model, the predicted probability of justifying aggression rose sharply for each level of agreement with antizionist beliefs, from 3% (95% CI [1%, 6%]) among those who completely disagreed to 27% (95% CI [18%, 37%]) among those who completely agreed—a nine-fold increase. A robustness test using an alternative measure of antizionist beliefs (“As long as the State of Israel exists, there can be no peace”) confirmed these results (see Supplemental Table S3).

The probability of refusing to take a stance rose from 7% (95% CI [4%, 13%]) among those rejecting antizionist beliefs to 20% (95% CI [16%, 25%]) among those who somewhat agreed (declining to 16% (95% CI [9%, 26%]) among those who completely agreed). These associations support the proposition that antizionist beliefs serve as a subtle and socially more acceptable way of expressing antisemitic hostility. To further probe this finding, I conducted follow-up analyses to test whether antizionist beliefs also predicted nonresponse to six survey items used to measure explicit antisemitic prejudice. I estimated a hurdle model regressing the count of “impossible to answer” responses to the prejudice items on antizionist beliefs, controlling for pro-Palestine views, education, and gender. Additionally, nonresponse to anti-Muslim prejudice items was included as a control to account for general tendencies to avoid taking a stance on sen-

sitive topics. Even after these controls, antizionist beliefs were linked to a higher expected count of nonresponse to antisemitic prejudice items. Specifically, those who “somewhat” agreed with the antizionist statement had a 34% higher nonresponse count compared to those who rejected it (IRR = 1.34, 95% CI [1.08, 1.65]), strengthening the argument that antizionist beliefs function as a socially acceptable vehicle for expressing antisemitic prejudice that people might be reluctant to disclose openly.

I investigated whether the same relationships held for the sample of Muslim respondents with an immigrant background. Supplemental Table S4 presents summary statistics. The share of Muslim respondents agreeing that anti-Jewish aggression is justifiable was 20%, compared to 12% in the population sample. The proportion agreeing with the statement reflecting antizionist beliefs was 51%, compared to 33% in the population, and two thirds of Muslim respondents (67%) did not express explicit anti-Jewish attitudes, compared to 85% in the population sample.

Antizionist beliefs were linked to justification of aggression in the baseline model, while no significant association was found with refusal to answer (see Supplemental Table S5). When including controls, antizionist beliefs were no longer associated with any of the outcomes. Explicit antisemitism predicted justification but not refusal to answer, like in the population sample. Follow-up analyses found that antizionist beliefs did not predict nonresponse to the antisemitic prejudice items, unlike in the general population.

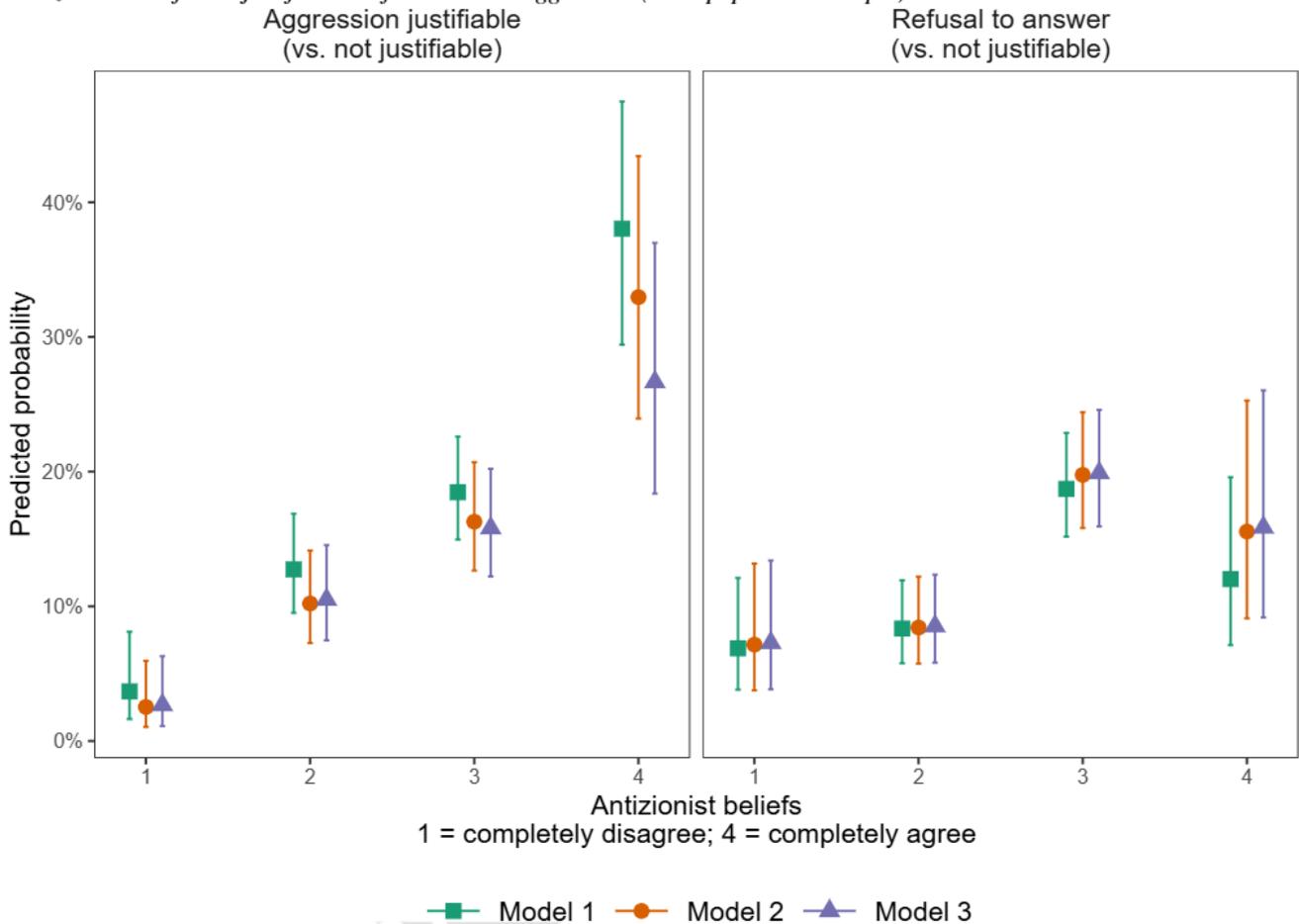
These results suggest that among Muslims in Norway, antizionist beliefs do not, to the same degree as in the general population, serve as a socially acceptable vehicle for expressing antisemitic sentiment. The fact that explicit antisemitic attitudes and justification of anti-Jewish aggression are more widespread in this group, and therefore less subject to social stigma, likely reduces the need for antizionist beliefs to act as a proxy.

Study 2

A replication of the analyses in Study 1 was carried out. This study was preregistered prior to accessing the data.

Materials and Methods

I used data from the 2022 survey of attitudes toward Jews and Muslims in Norway, which followed up the 2017 survey. The 2022 survey also included a population sample and a Muslim sample. TNS Kantar’s access panel was again utilized to draw a nationally representative sample of respondents, while the sample of Muslims with immigrant background was selected from the National Population Register. The total population sample size was 1,653, while the Muslim sample size was 821 (Moe, 2023). Outcome, predictor, and control variables were defined like in Study 1.

Figure 1*Antizionist beliefs and justification of anti-Jewish aggression (2017 population sample)*

Note. Predicted probabilities (95% CIs) of justifying anti-Jewish aggression and refusing to answer (vs. not justifying) given increasing levels of agreement with antizionist beliefs (“Israel treats the Palestinians just as badly as the Jews were treated during WWII”). Model 1 includes no controls; Model 2 adjusts for pro-Palestine sympathies, education, and gender; Model 3 additionally controls for explicit antisemitic attitudes.

Results

Summary statistics for the 2022 population sample are presented in Supplemental Table S6. The proportion of respondents agreeing that anti-Jewish aggression is justifiable was 11%, with 25% selecting “impossible to answer” and 41% completely rejecting the statement. This is similar to the 2017 sample. The proportion holding antizionist beliefs was also similar (34%), while 87% did not express explicitly anti-Jewish attitudes.

Replicating the findings from Study 1, antizionist beliefs significantly predicted both justification of anti-Jewish aggression and refusal to take a stance against it, even after controlling for pro-Palestine sympathy, education, gender, and explicit antisemitism.² Figure 2 shows that the pre-

²Note that these analyses deviate from the preregistered plan in variable construction and regression type. The preregistered approach used dichotomous outcome and predictor variables, which led to the unforeseen exclusion of a large number of observations. In addition, the antisemitic prejudice index specified in the preregistration focused narrowly on anti-Jewish stereotypes. A more comprehensive combined index of antisemitic attitudes, which incorporates measures of prejudice, social distance, and dislike of Jews, was available and deemed preferable for this study. To address these issues, I redefined the outcome as a three-category variable and used multinomial regression to analyze it; I also factorized the focal predictor variable to retain more information and utilize a larger part of the sample. The combined antisemitism index was used instead of the more narrow prejudice index. Full details of these deviations, along with results from the preregistered models, are provided in the

dicted probabilities of justifying aggression increases with the strength of antizionist beliefs, highly similar to the results from Study 1 (for detailed model summaries, see Supplemental Table S7). In the full model, the probability of justifying aggression rose twelve-fold, from 2% (95% CI [1%, 6%]) among those who completely disagreed to 24% (95% CI [16%, 33%]) among those who completely agreed with the antizionist statement. A robustness check using an alternative measure of antizionist beliefs (“As long as the State of Israel exists, there can be no peace”) produced the same pattern of results (see Supplemental Table S8).

Stronger antizionist beliefs were also linked to higher predicted probabilities of refusing to take a stance against anti-Jewish aggression, rising from 6% (95% CI [3%, 11%]) among those completely rejecting antizionist beliefs to 18% (95% CI [11%, 27%]) among those who fully agreed. Like in Study 1, I conducted follow-up analyses to test whether antizionist beliefs predicted nonresponse to blatantly antisemitic prejudice items, again controlling for pro-Palestine sympathies, education, gender, and nonresponse to explicit anti-Muslim prejudice items. Compared to those who completely rejected antizionist beliefs, the expected nonresponse count was 28% higher for those who somewhat disagreed (IRR = 1.28, 95% CI [1.01, 1.61]), 39% higher for those who somewhat agreed (IRR = 1.39, 95% CI [1.11, 1.76]), and 62% higher for those who completely agreed (IRR = 1.62, 95% CI [1.24, 2.11]). These patterns provide strong confirming evidence that antizionist beliefs act as a socially acceptable proxy for expressing anti-Jewish hostility.

Next, I investigated whether these associations held for the sample of Muslims with an immigrant background. Looking first at the summary statistics, Supplemental Table S9 shows that the proportion of Muslim respondents agreeing that anti-Jewish aggression is justifiable remained unchanged since 2017 (19%). The proportion completely rejecting justification of aggression (“Does not reflect my views at all”) increased from 29% in 2017 to 40% in 2022, while the proportion not expressing explicitly anti-Jewish attitudes was about the same as in 2017 (68%).

Among Muslim respondents, antizionist beliefs were not associated with justification of aggression or refusal to answer (see Supplemental Table S10). This is similar to the findings from Study 1, except that here, antizionist beliefs did not predict justification of aggression even in the baseline model. Antizionist beliefs also failed to predict nonresponse to the antisemitic prejudice items in the Muslim sample, confirming the result from Study 1.

Discussion

On October 7, 2023, following news of the Hamas-led invasion and massacre in southern Israel, Norwegian police immediately increased security measures around Jewish sites and institutions (NRK, 2023). The expectation of an elevated

threat was based on experience: in recent decades, waves of antisemitic harassment and violence have tended to follow flare-ups in conflicts involving Israel. This time was no exception. In 2023, Norwegian police recorded a three-fold increase in reported antisemitic hate crimes compared to the preceding five years (Politidirektoratet, 2024). In North America, Australia, and Western Europe, monitoring agencies likewise reported unprecedented rates of antisemitic incidents, with negative effects on Jews’ sense of safety, security, and sense of belonging (Campbell, 2024; Eichner, 2024b; Knowles & McCaskill, 2024; Macbool & Parry, 2024). Against this background, there is an urgent need to understand the dynamics involved when conflict events in the Middle East give rise to aggression against Jews in other countries. This article investigates an essential but understudied dimension of these dynamics, namely the role of public beliefs about Israel in shaping the moral climates that permit or constrain such hostility.

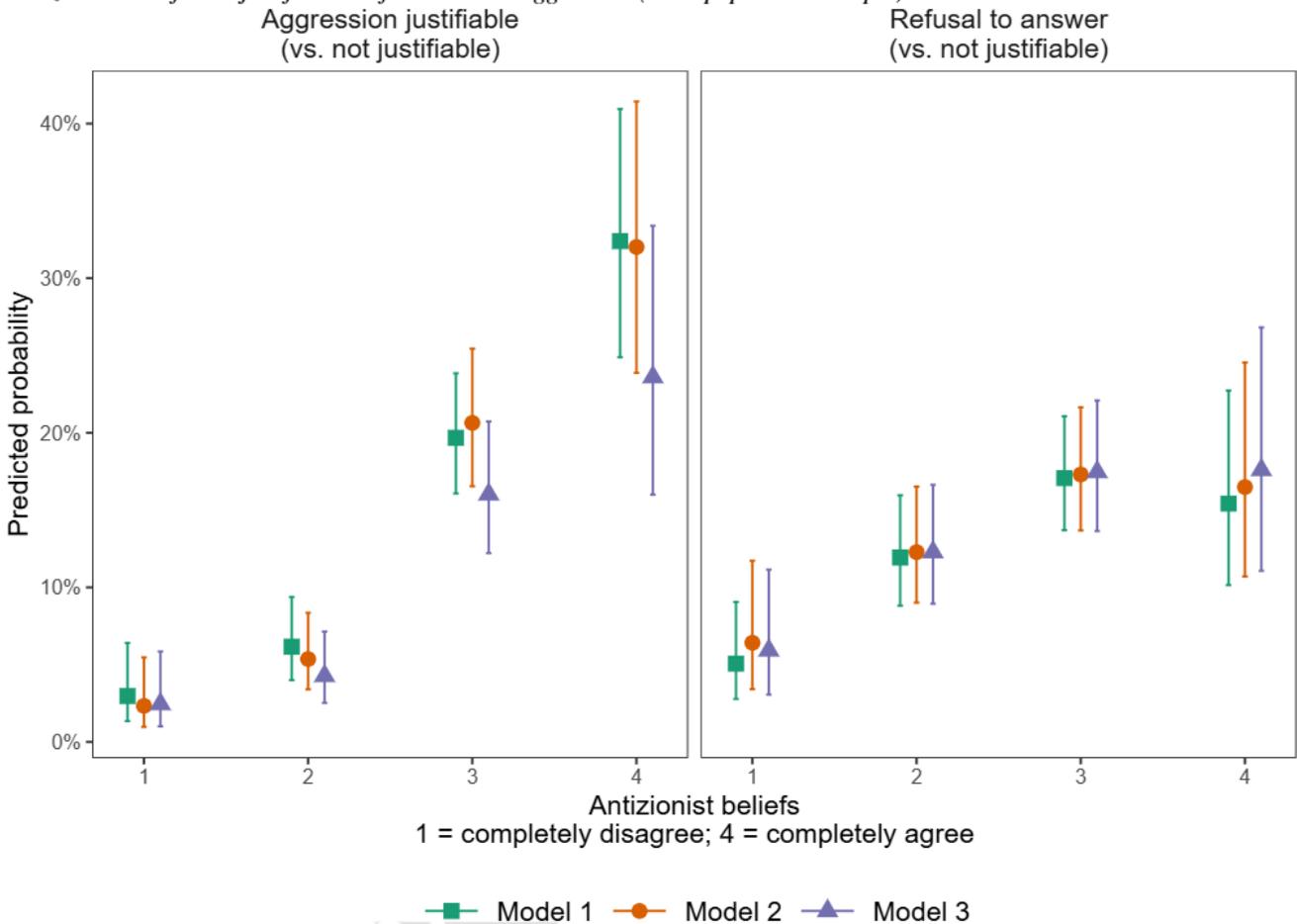
Drawing on social psychological insights that see perpetrators of outgroup aggression as morally motivated, i.e., acting based on expectations that others will justify or at least silently condone their acts (Fiske & Rai, 2015), as well as theoretical and empirical accounts that suggest antizionist beliefs (strong negative beliefs about the Jewish state that frame it as fundamentally illegitimate) function as a socially acceptable way to express anti-Jewish hostility (Allington & Hirsh, 2019; Hirsh, 2018; Tabarovsky, 2022; Wistrich, 2012), I hypothesized that antizionist beliefs would predict justification of aggression against Jews and refusal to take a stance against such acts.

Across two studies based on nationally representative surveys conducted five years apart in Norway, findings provide robust evidence that people holding antizionist beliefs are more likely to justify harassment and violence against Jews and refuse taking a stance against such acts. Compared to those who rejected antizionist beliefs, people who endorsed them were 9 to 12 times more likely to justify aggression and 3 times more likely to refuse answering the question. These associations held even after controlling for pro-Palestinian sympathies, education, gender, and blatantly anti-Jewish attitudes. Robustness checks using an alternative measure of antizionist beliefs confirmed these patterns. Follow-up analyses further revealed that people with stronger antizionist beliefs were significantly more likely to select “impossible to answer” when faced with questions designed to measure explicit antisemitic prejudice (e.g., “the Jews largely have themselves to blame for being persecuted”). These findings strongly support the notion that antizionist beliefs do not merely reflect political views about the conflict in the Middle East, but also function as a socially acceptable vehicle for expressing anti-Jewish hostility.

Online Supplementary Materials.

Figure 2

Antizionist beliefs and justification of anti-Jewish aggression (2022 population sample)



Note. Predicted probabilities (95% CIs) of justifying anti-Jewish aggression and refusal to answer given increasing levels of agreement with antizionist beliefs (“Israel treats the Palestinians just as badly as the Jews were treated during WWII”). Model 1 includes no controls; Model 2 adjusts for pro-Palestine sympathies, education, and gender; Model 3 additionally controls for explicit antisemitic attitudes.

Overall, results indicate that hostile public beliefs about Israel contribute to a climate of moral permissiveness regarding anti-Jewish aggression. With such beliefs being endorsed by a third or more of the general population, they appear to have attained the status of a societal norm in the Norwegian context.³ This is cause for considerable concern, because research on the psychology of intergroup conflict stresses the key role of normative climates in fueling or constraining outgroup aggression (Crandall et al., 2002; Fiske & Rai, 2015; Lickel et al., 2006; Saguy & Reifen-Tagar, 2022). Social norms provide information to potential aggressors about whether they can expect others to justify or condone their acts, thereby influencing the threshold for expressing prejudice and engaging in hostile acts.

The findings resonate with the distinction made 30 years

ago by Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) between subtle and blatant prejudice in Western democracies. These authors distinguished three modes of relating to the presence of a strong anti-prejudice norm: *equalitarians* internalize it, *bigots* ignore it, and *subtles* comply with it while expressing prejudice in “ostensibly non-prejudiced ways that ‘slip under the norm’.” (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995, p. 73).” Such an understanding of contemporary forms of prejudice, which has become central to scholarship on racism and islamophobia (Nadal et al., 2012; Pearson et al., 2009; Sears, 1988), also

³A survey conducted in the spring of 2024, during the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, found that the share of Norwegians agreeing with the statement that Israel treats the Palestinians just as badly as the Jews were treated during WWII had risen to 51% (Moe, 2024).

applies to antisemitism. The analyses reported here add to a growing literature indicating that antizionist beliefs often function as a subtle expression of anti-Jewish hostility, structurally similar to other forms of subtle prejudice (Allington & Hirsh, 2019; Binstok et al., 2024; F. Cohen et al., 2009; Hirsh, 2018; Smith, 2008). For example, a recent study of antisemitic victimization across 12 EU countries found a strong link between the proportion of a country's population expressing an unfavorable view of Israel and a higher likelihood of Jews experiencing antisemitic harassment and violence. In contrast, the proportion expressing antisemitic attitudes was not related to these outcomes (Enstad, 2024). The present research suggests a plausible explanation for this association: in contemporary societies, negative opinion of Israel often masks underlying hostility toward Jews.

Exploratory analyses of separate samples of respondents with Muslim immigrant backgrounds revealed notable differences. In contrast to the general population, antizionist beliefs were not associated with either justification of aggression, refusal to take a stance against it, or nonresponse to items measuring explicit antisemitic prejudice. This divergence can plausibly be explained by reference to the above-mentioned importance of social norms. While blatant antisemitic attitudes are stigmatized in the majority population, explicit antisemitic views (including justification of anti-Jewish aggression) appear to be more prevalent and less socially constrained among this particular demographic (Jikeli, 2015b). As a result, antizionist beliefs may be less necessary as a subtle proxy for anti-Jewish hostility.

The generalizability of results presented here must be considered in light of contextual factors. The evidence comes from Norway, a small liberal-democratic country with a very small Jewish community consisting of 1500 to 2000 persons (about 0.03% of the population). Historical research points to the existence of a strong anti-antisemitic norm in Norwegian society after 1945, persisting into the present day (Simonsen, 2023), and Norway generally scores low on antisemitic attitudes in international surveys. However, observers have noted a strong current of anti-Israel opinion in Norwegian society in the 21st century (Gerstenfeld, 2009), and events following the October 7 attack and the subsequent war—such as the Norwegian Foreign Minister prohibiting the King of Norway from sending official condolences to Israel—led to a deterioration in the diplomatic relationship between the two countries, with Norway's attitude characterized as one of "sheer hostility" (Abrams, 2024; Brekke, 2024; Eichner, 2024a). This dual context, where a strong norm against blatant antisemitic prejudice exists alongside widespread negative opinion toward Israel, is likely not unique to Norway. The findings may therefore have broader relevance for other liberal democratic societies.

Responding to the resurgence of antisemitism, the EU, the U.S., Norway, and other governments have launched

strategies and action plans to combat antisemitism and safeguard Jewish life (European Commission, 2021; The White House, 2023). For such strategies to be effective, they must be based on a sound understanding of the factors that influence antisemitic hostility and aggression. Findings from the present research suggest the need for policymakers to recognize that antizionist beliefs, which frame the Jewish state and its supporters as fundamentally illegitimate, can contribute to moral permissiveness toward anti-Jewish aggression. Designing policy to counteract such a dynamic is challenging, given the subtle and socially embedded nature of these beliefs and attitudes, and their importance to large voter groups. A plausible starting point could be targeted educational interventions to help people recognize how antizionist rhetoric can function as a subtle form of prejudice.

In terms of future research, comparative studies across different national contexts could help determine the generalizability of these findings, especially with respect to societies with varying demographic compositions and historical relationships to Jewish communities. Further, experimental designs should be employed to probe causal mechanisms. For instance, vignette studies could manipulate the framing of Israel-related narratives to test how different discursive contexts might activate or suppress justification of aggression, using subtle variations in language that either reinforce or challenge antizionist tropes or beliefs (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010).

Conclusion

Recurring waves of anti-Jewish aggression cannot be adequately understood without reference to the larger social environments in which attacking Jews is seen as justifiable. Across two nationally representative surveys in Norway, the findings show a robust association between antizionist beliefs and justifying anti-Jewish aggression or refusing to take a stance against it. By demonstrating how these beliefs can reflect a subtle form of anti-Jewish prejudice, results shed light on the dynamics that foster permissive environments for harassment and violence against Jewish communities in contemporary Western democracies.

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