

ANTI-SEMITISM IN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES AND ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GAZA WAR 2014: THE EXAMPLE OF AUSTRIA AND GERMANY

HELGA EMBACHER AND JAN RYBAK

Introduction

The new phenomenon of so-called ‘Muslim antisemitism’ is complex. It is seen as a central characteristic of a ‘new antisemitism’, a term that has itself caused much controversy since the beginning of the Second Intifada, which led to a wave of antisemitism in some European countries.¹ Several studies emphasise a shift of the ‘typical’ antisemite from extreme right-wing skinheads to the anti-globalisation left, liberal media and disaffected young Muslim men.² Whereas left-wing antisemitism and anti-Zionism are no longer regarded as new phenomena in Europe and have been well-researched, in particular in Germany and Austria, antisemitism as it is articulated by European Muslims is extremely perplexing since Muslims can also be seen – and see themselves – as primary victims of racism, intolerance and exclusion. In fact, in the wake of 9/11 and subsequent terror attacks in Europe (such as Istanbul in 2003, Madrid in 2004, London in 2005 and Paris in 2014), Islam has been increasingly regarded as foreign and a danger to ‘Judeo-Christian European society and culture’. Racism and Islamophobia in general also get less attention from media and society than antisemitism.

Muslim antisemitism has been instrumentalised by various players. Influential European far-right parties (such as France’s National Front, the Vlaams Belang, Geert Wilders’ Liberty Party and the FPÖ in Austria) use anti-antisemitism as an instrument in their campaigns against Muslims and Islam by protesting against Muslim antisemitism.³ The portrayal of Muslims as the ultimate perpetrators also serves to suppress debate about antisemitism in the majority society.⁴ Although Muslims are not alone in sometimes crossing the line between a critique of Israel’s politics and antisemitism, the media and wider political discourse focused on ‘Muslim antisemitism’ during the Gaza war in 2014. Through an analysis of the debate in Austria and Germany, this article demonstrates that antisemitism in Muslim communities cannot be seen simply as a side-effect of migration or a transfer of escalations in the Middle East, but must be seen in a much broader context, which necessarily includes prejudice against Islam and Islamophobia. It is also the case that ‘Muslim antisemitism’ has been instrumentalised in Austria and Germany, as a means to whitewash the majority society and the national self-image.

It should also be mentioned that in Austria and Germany only a small number of physical attacks on Jews have taken place since the second Intifada, compared to France or Belgium. Violent assaults, mostly targeting Jewish memorials and symbols, have usually been committed by perpetrators from the autochthonous extreme right. It is also worth noting that Muslims who participated in anti-

Israel/anti-war demonstrations mostly had a Palestinian and Arab background and, therefore, are not representative of the Muslim communities in Austria and Germany whose roots are mainly in Turkey and the former Yugoslavia. Only the Gaza flotilla incident in June 2010, in which six Turkish aid activists were killed by Israeli military fire, seems to have mobilised larger numbers of Austrian and German Turks in support of Palestine. For the first time, Turkish flags appeared at anti-Israel demonstrations in several Austrian and German cities.

Defining ‘antisemitism’, ‘Zionism’ and ‘anti-Zionism’

We are aware that the terms ‘antisemitism’, ‘Zionism’ and ‘anti-Zionism’ have been the subject of intense debates and there are no universally accepted definitions. Therefore, the definitions we use are working definitions adopted in accordance with our specific research interests. Concerning the term antisemitism, we follow the definition of well-known Holocaust scholar Helen Fein. According to her, antisemitism is ‘a persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs toward *Jews as a collectivity* manifested in *individuals* as attitudes, and in *culture* as myth, ideology, folklore and imagery, and in *actions* – social or legal discrimination, political mobilisation against the Jews, and collective or state violence – which results in and/or is designed to distance, displace, or destroy Jews as Jews’.⁵ Since our paper focuses on Austria and Germany, the phenomenon of so-called secondary antisemitism must be included in the analysis. According to this concept, traditional antisemitism ‘after Auschwitz’ became politically unacceptable, whereas Jews were still hated despite the Holocaust. As a result, antisemitism has been expressed in the form of certain codes (such as using ‘East Coast’ to refer to Jews in the USA), as well as in the form of *Entlastungsstrategien* (strategies of exoneration), such as maintaining that Israel is treating the Palestinians in the same way the Nazis treated the Jews.

Concerning the crucial question as to when criticism of Israeli policy and anti-Zionism can be defined as antisemitism, we will use the definition of Brian Klug, who regards anti-Zionism as antisemitic when traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes are projected onto Israel.⁶ Thus, we differentiate between, on the one hand, antisemitism and, on the other hand, criticism of Israeli policy and anti-Zionism as a political position. Nevertheless, we are aware that there is often a thin line between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, as well as many grey areas.

‘Austria for Gaza’: The UETD in the pro-Palestinian movement

In Austria, the debate about antisemitism focused on a pro-Gaza demonstration in Vienna and a friendly football game in Bischofshofen. On 20 July 2014, up to 30,000 people took to the streets in Vienna to show solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza. Demonstrations also took place in cities such as Salzburg, Linz, Innsbruck and Bregenz where, alongside many Palestinian and Turkish flags, a few Jihadi flags appeared. Most of the demonstrations were peaceful but emotional and some controversial posters were in evidence. Meanwhile, several days later in Bischofshofen, during a friendly match between Maccabi Haifa and OSC Lille, approximately 20 young men with Turkish and Palestinian flags stormed the field and attacked the Israeli players. The incident achieved worldwide media coverage.

The Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD), the main organiser of the pro-Gaza demonstrations, assumed a leading role in the Austrian Palestinian solidarity movement. Whereas the attackers in Bischofshofen see themselves as outsiders, the UETD represents successful, highly-educated immigrants or children of immigrants who stress their Turkish identity. The organisation also has very close ties to the Turkish AKP (Justice and Development Party). The Austrian branch of the UETD has been in existence since 2006 but only became well known in June 2014, when it invited Turkish Prime Minister Tayip Erdoğan to appear in Vienna during his election campaign, causing fierce debates in the Austrian media as well as within the Turkish community. During the Gezi park protests in Turkey, representatives of the UETD also supported pro-Erdoğan demonstrations in Vienna: approximately 8,000 marched in favour and only 600 against Erdoğan. In this way, the UETD established a network which could be activated during the pro-Gaza demonstrations in 2014.⁷

So as not to endanger its image as a Turkish organisation which supports the integration of its members into Austrian society, the UETD wanted the pro-Gaza demonstration to be peaceful and attempted to avoid blatant antisemitism. Nevertheless, some controversial placards were in evidence, comparing Israel with Hitler or announcing the end of the Jewish state. Abdurrahman Karayazili, the former chairman of the UETD, also crossed a line when he posted a remark –which was attributed to Erdoğan, but disputed – on his Facebook page: ‘What is the difference between what Nazis and Hitler did and what this Israeli administration is doing now?’ He also posted a frequently-used photo collage comparing children in the Warsaw ghetto with Palestinian children facing the Israel Defence Forces.

Altogether, most of the antisemitic stereotypes that appeared in the context of the war in Gaza were well-known and have been used worldwide, not only by Muslims. But it is a relatively new phenomenon in Austria for speakers at rallies, such as Karayazili, to refer to the *umma* and justify their engagement for Gaza in terms of Islam. The UETD also used the Gaza war to direct its critique towards the Austrian media and political leaders, who were blamed for holding a one-sided position on the war, as well as highlighting blatant Islamophobia in Austria, which was said to prevent Muslims from feeling at home there.

During the war in Gaza it became clear that it was the active role played by Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan in the Middle East conflict, combined with the transfer of the Gezi conflict into the Viennese Turkish Community, that mobilised a large part of the Austrian Turkish community to speak out on the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Nevertheless, Austrian antisemitism cannot be simply seen as an ‘import’ arising from migration, an assumption that many leading politicians (such as Interior Minister Mikl-Leitner) as well as journalists in quality newspapers (such as SN, Standard and Presse) seemed to make. For example, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), a major proponent of Austrian antisemitism, racism and Islamophobia, was among the first to outsource antisemitism to the Muslim community. Party leader Strache, who has so far shown very little sensitivity to antisemitism and was himself accused of posting an antisemitic cartoon on his Facebook site, referred to Austria’s historic responsibility for Israel to demonstrate the need to show strong sensitivity where antisemitism was concerned. He concluded that: ‘If immigrants think they can import their conflicts into Austria, then they are in the wrong place’.⁸ Some of his Facebook followers expressed their sentiments very clearly:

‘Raus mit den Türken’ (Turks, leave our country).⁹ Siding with Israel is a new departure for the FPÖ, which supported Hezbollah and Hamas during the wars in 2006 and 2008-2009. It was only in 2010, following the politics of Le Pen and Geert Wilders, that it changed its strategy and started to identify with Israel, portraying it as a victim of Islamism.¹⁰

Such hypocritical and often anti-Muslim positions, demonstrated by the media and Austrian politicians in order to absolve society in general or their own political party from antisemitism, pushed Muslims (in particular the UEDT) into a corner from which it was hard to escape. Instead of distancing themselves from Erdoğan (as was expected by its critics), the UETD embraced their role as victims of Islamophobia. A supporter of Karayazili, for example, posted on Facebook: ‘Not everything is antisemitic. If they want us to distance [ourselves] from antisemitism, then we cry Islamophobia.’

The Gaza protests in Germany

Germany, like most European countries, saw significant protests against Israel’s war on the Gaza strip in the summer of 2014. These sparked a large-scale public debate about antisemitism within immigrant Muslim communities, which were also identified as the main actors within the protest movement. In the earliest days of the war spontaneous protests erupted, usually mobilising just a handful of young men, predominantly with a Middle Eastern immigrant background.¹¹ Just over a week later, anti-war and left-wing organisations engaged in the issue and initiated their own protests. However, the movement peaked in late July and failed to mobilise throughout the following month, although the war continued until August 26.

From the start, the vast majority of media reports focused almost exclusively on a number of grossly antisemitic slogans articulated during the earliest demonstrations. These included calls for Jews to be gassed, Hitler-salutes and an infamous slogan caught on tape (‘Jew, Jew, cowardly pig!’) that featured in almost every televised piece on the demonstrations. Additionally, reports in most major publications placed slogans equating the Holocaust with the Israeli policy towards the Palestinians alongside religious slogans (such as ‘Allahu akbar!’), as proof of supposedly irrational hatred of Jews being the only possible motivating force behind the protests. An in-depth analysis of the demonstrations, however, clearly shows that these sentiments were not dominant.

Although there is a significant lack of quantifiable data on anti-Jewish views among German Muslims, it is clear that they must be discussed in the context of marginalisation, anti-immigrant/anti-Muslim racism and the perception of a Western-enforced victimhood. Obviously, there are significantly different motivations among Muslims with Palestinian, Lebanese or Turkish backgrounds. However, the experience or perception of marginalisation and discrimination is a major element in the construction of identity, while projecting this victimisation onto the Palestine/Israel conflict means identifying with the Palestinian victims and condemning the Israeli perpetrators. In many cases, this includes the adoption of Islamic anti-Israel and anti-Jewish positions, with an almost unidentifiable

dividing line between the two. This process is also intertwined with a Manichean perception of the conflict and a lack of differentiation between Jews, Zionists, the state of Israel and Israeli policy.

In addition, as Wolfram Stender has suggested¹², the comparatively more open articulation of antisemitism among some immigrants does not necessarily mean that antisemitism is more common among Muslim communities than in the majority of the population, but rather that the social taboo regarding anti-Jewish prejudices has not been internalised in the same way. It is also the case that anti-Zionist statements are often used as a substitute for anti-Jewish rhetoric, so that, in keeping with societal and legal regulations, the term ‘Jew’ is replaced with ‘Zionist’. As a result, the reaction of many commentators, politicians and the media is to equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism and to denounce the entire protest movement as being driven by anti-Jewish hatred.

As a result of this dominant perception of the nature of the protests, most media and politicians identified the allegedly antisemitic culprits very quickly. German President Joachim Gauck stated: ‘We have the rule of law in this country. We call on those immigrant communities who have not understood that: This is a country of tolerance. Antisemitism, even if it is new and imported from foreign countries [...] will not be tolerated.’¹³ What was intended to be a bold statement against antisemitism among immigrants effectively served to outsource antisemitism to them. This not only contradicts research conducted in 2014, according to which 27 per cent of autochthonous Germans harboured antisemitic sentiments¹⁴, but also excuses the German majority population from the suspicion of being antisemitic. The president’s interpretation of events was adopted by others. Shimon Stein, the former Israeli ambassador in Berlin, stated in an interview that ‘this new antisemitism is imported to Germany from the Orient by Arab and Muslim agents’.¹⁵

The magazine *Der Spiegel* (28 July 2014) stated that antisemitic slogans were a sign of the failed integration of Muslim immigrants into German society, implying that integration would automatically end antisemitism, at the same time as supporting the German belief that they themselves were free of antisemitism. Similarly, politicians of the Conservative Party threatened immigrant evil-doers with deportation. This position very much corresponded with growing Islamophobia and the perception of all Muslims as a threat, as was increasingly evident in Germany at this time in regard to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The massive anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant movement PEGIDA (*Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of Europe*), which developed towards the end of 2014, explicitly attacked Muslims for their alleged antisemitism and vowed to defend what it perceived as Western Judeo-Christian culture. One key element was the permanent reference to Germany’s Nazi past. Henryk M. Broder wrote in the right-wing tabloid *Bild Zeitung* that ‘the anti-Semites of today do not shout “Heil Hitler” but “Allahu akbar”’ (25 July 2014). A commentator in the conservative paper *Die Welt* stressed the ‘lessons of the Weimar Republic: that democracy needs to be ready to defend itself against its enemies’ (25 July 2014). Once again this equated Muslims living in Germany with the German Nazis.

This interpretation of events must be contextualised within the German interpretation of history and

the search for national identity. Although defensiveness in regard to German atrocities has dominated for a long time, at least since the 1990s, there have been significant recent shifts. German identity construction increasingly revolved around being world champions in the critical assessment of one's own past.¹⁶ In addition, as Peter Ullrich¹⁷ put it, due to the lack of a Jewish presence as a result of the Holocaust, the object of identification became the state of Israel. Its security was declared the *raison d'être* of the German state by Chancellor Merkel. This implied that the condemnation of antisemitism among immigrants and non-autochthonous Germans could revitalise German national identity and national pride. While a right-wing commentator argued in the leading *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that fighting against Muslim antisemitism is an 'unconditional German duty' (22 July 2014). While the *Bild Zeitung* heralded a 4,000 strong rally against antisemitism, initiated by the Jewish community and supported by all leading parties, with the words: 'Today, Germany raises its voice!' (14 September 2014).

Conclusion

Antisemitism in Muslim communities is not only a side-effect of migration or a transfer of escalations in the Middle East, but must also be seen as a transfer of classic antisemitic stereotypes from the majority (non-Muslim) society into the heterogeneous European Muslim communities. During the war in Gaza it was evident that, in spite of some religious sentiments, anti-Zionism or antisemitism in Muslim communities hardly differed from left-wing or right-wing expressions of antisemitism. What differs are the various motives that are still largely unexplored and it is important to stress that there might be different motives within different Muslim communities. In other words, Palestine has a different meaning for immigrants and refugees from Palestine or Arab countries living in Berlin, than it does for young people with a Turkish background who grew up in Vienna. Therefore, further research on the various motives and emotions involved in identifying with the Palestinians (and with the Turkish state and government) is necessary.

It is also clear that 'Muslim antisemitism' has been used by various sides in Austria and Germany to exonerate the majority society and, in the case of the FPÖ, to confirm to their followers that Muslims are unable to integrate into Austrian and German society. In the context of the construction of a German national identity, raising the charge of antisemitism against the Muslim minority serves a dual purpose: It allows the majority society to 'prove' its new, enlightened, anti-antisemitic self-image, while the Muslim minority serves as the despicable 'Other' enabling the moral self-reassurance of German nationalism.

Notes

¹ See, for example: D. Rabinovici, U. Speck & N. Sznaider (eds), *Neuer Antisemitismus? Eine globale Debatte*, Frankfurt/Main, Edition Suhrkamp, 2004; M. Schwarz-Friesel, E. Friesel & J. Reinharz (eds), *Aktueller Antisemitismus – Ein Phänomen der Mitte*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2010; H. Embacher, 'Der Gaza-Krieg 2014 und sein Widerhall in Europa: Vorgeschichte und Antisemitismus-Debatten', *Chilufim*, 18, 2015, 3-38.

² See: W. Bergmann & J. Wetzei, *Manifestations of Anti-Semitism in the European Union – First Semester 2002*, Synthesis Report, Vienna and Berlin, European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), 2003.

³ See: E. Gans, 'Anti-antisemitische Enthusiasmus und selektiver Philosemitismus. Geert Wilders, die PVV und die Juden', *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung*, 23, 2014, 93-104.

- ⁴ See: W. Benz, *Antisemitismus und Islamkritik: Bilanz und Perspektive*, Berlin, Metropol Verlag, 2011.
- ⁵ H. Fein, 'Dimensions of Antisemitism: Attitudes, Collective Accusations and Actions', in H. Fein (ed.), *The Persisting Question: Sociological Perspectives and Social Contexts of Antisemitism, Current Research on Antisemitism: Volume 1*, Berlin/New York, De Gruyter, 1987, 67.
- ⁶ B. Klug, 'The collective Jew: Israel and the new antisemitism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 37(2), 2003, 117-138.
- ⁷ The observations about the strategy of the UETD during the Gaza war in 2014 are based on B. Edtmaier & B. Trautwein, 'Pro-Gaza-Kundgebungen in Österreich 2010/2014. Zwischen Antisemitismus(verdacht) und Islamfeindlichkeit', *Chilufim* 18, 2015, 201-252.
- ⁸ *Vienna Online*, 22 July 2014. He also posted on his Facebook page the comment: 'We don't want and need such a thing in our beautiful Heimat'.
- ⁹ A number of letters to the editors of German language newspaper *Österreich* contained similar sentences, such as: 'This happens if you permit Muslims to enter the country'.
- ¹⁰ H. Embacher, 'Emotion und Imaginationen: Israelbilder in Österreich von 1948 bis zur Gegenwart', *Jüdisches Echo*, 55, 2006, 35-41; Edtmaier & Trautwein, 'Pro-Gaza-Kundgebungen in Österreich 2010/2014', 236-244.
- ¹¹ Hostilities in and around the Gaza strip intensified around 8 July 2014; the first documented demonstration took place on 10 July 2014.
- ¹² W. Stender, G. Follert & M. Özdoğan (eds) *Konstellationen des Antisemitismus. Antisemitismusforschung und sozialpädagogische Praxis*, Wiesbaden, Springer, 2010.
- ¹³ Statement given at a press conference in Berlin, 23 July 2014.
- ¹⁴ Anti-Defamation League, Global 100, 2014, available at: <http://global100.adl.org/#map> (last visited 4 Sep. 2015).
- ¹⁵ In an interview with German state TV (ZDF) 7 August 2014.
- ¹⁶ I. Quinideau, 'Schuldabwehr und Nationale Identität – Psychologische Funktionen des Antisemitismus', in M. Brosch, M. Elm, N. Geißler, B. E. Simbürger & O. von Wrochem (eds) *Exklusive Solidarität. Linker Antisemitismus in Deutschland. Vom Idealismus zur Antiglobalisierungsbewegung*, Berlin, Metropol Verlag, 2007, 157-164.
- ¹⁷ P. Ullrich, *Die Linke, Israel und Palästina. Nahostdiskurse in Großbritannien und Deutschland*, Berlin, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2008, 48.

Biographical note

Helga Embacher is Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Salzburg. Her fields of research are National Socialism, Jewish history and antisemitism. She led the project (New) Antisemitism and Anti-Americanism in Germany, France and Great Britain. She supervises the project Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Austria in the context of the Gaza war in summer 2014.

Jan Rybak is currently a PhD researcher at the European University Institute in Florence. He is working on Zionism and Jewish nationalism in the context of the European Revolution and state formation following the First World War. He participates in the project on Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe in the context of the Gaza war in summer 2014.

PUBLISHED BY: THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON MIGRATION, REFUGEES AND BELONGING, UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON – [WWW.UEL.AC.UK/CMRB](http://www.uel.ac.uk/cmrb)

DIRECTOR: PROF NIRA YUVAL-DAVIS – [N.YUVAL-DAVIS@UEL.AC.UK](mailto:n.yuval-davis@uel.ac.uk)

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE CENTRE FOR PALESTINE STUDIES, LONDON MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE, SOAS AND THE RUNNYMEDE TRUST.



CMRB
The Centre for Research on
Migration, Refugees and Belonging



**LONDON
MIDDLE EAST
INSTITUTE**
SOAS University of London

