

“I could never perceive Zionists as real people.”¹

Anti-Semitism among Different Groups of Refugees from the Middle East in Germany²

Conference Talk on the Occasion of the International Scholars Conference “Contending with Antisemitism in a Rapidly Changing Political Climate”, Held by the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, Indiana University, Bloomington (IN, USA), March 23-27, 2019³

Anti-Semitism among Muslim immigrants became a topic of interest in the German society in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis. But it was not until spring 2018 when there was once again an anti-Semitism debate which for the first time, indeed, focused on the anti-Semitism among immigrants from countries with a Muslim majority population. Although there is the danger of externalizing the anti-Semitism problem as if it were alien to German society – just like it is instrumentalized by the AfD –, it is important to monitor anti-Semitic and Israel-hostile attitudes among refugees from the Middle East as to counter such ideas is important regardless of the origin of people.

Already in November 2016 the German NGO project “witnesses of time witnesses” which originally started as a Shoah remembrance project launched a new sub-project under my guidance to counter contemporary anti-Semitism, including rightist movements and leftist anti-Zionism as well as anti-Semitism among some Muslim immigrants. Alongside educational seminars at universities and other educational facilities our first main project which started in February 2017 is to monitor anti-Semitism and anti-Israel hostility among refugees who have recently arrived.

¹ Male Muslim refugee from Syria, 22 years old.

² This paper follows the Oxford style of the usage of English language (hence e.g. ‘anti-Semitism’, not ‘antisemitism’).

³ I would like to express my gratitude to the host of the conference, Professor Alvin Rosenfeld, for the unique opportunity to attend this conference, and to Professor Gunther Jikeli for his helpful remarks and his encouragements.

The aim was to interview refugees, mainly young ones, who came to Germany in the past five years from the main emigration countries in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran) with a reasonable knowledge of either English or German – just because we don't have an abundance of language skills in our project. We included female and non-Muslim refugees as well to gain a more diverse and perhaps balanced perspective. The focus of the interviews which last about an hour each is a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach.

Several interviews have been conducted since March 2017 by volunteers from our project – including myself – who have been instructed carefully beforehand. Because the volunteers of the project live in different parts of Germany the interviews were conducted in several German cities, including Stuttgart, Hof, and Hamburg. Quite unfortunately, we were not able to conduct enough interviews in a sufficient quality to deliver what I planned to do. First of all, it has proven to be very difficult to actually find refugees we could conduct interviews with. Not only was our potential group limited to English or German speaking refugees but, furthermore, the German institutions dealing with refugees proved to be unwilling in most cases to cooperate with us. In Germany the district administrations (*Landratsämter*) are responsible for the accommodation, supplies and even the education of most of the refugees. Since 2015 these administrations usually appointed a special commissioner for cross-sectoral issues regarding the refugees (*Querschnittsthemenbeauftragter*). So, we asked them to give us the opportunity to contact some refugees in their refugee homes to ask them whether they were willing to take part in an interview about their biographies and religious tolerance. The pattern was all the same: the special commissioner first seemed to be interested, we assured him that the interviews were to be carried out anonymously, so there wouldn't be a data protection issue, and then, suddenly, before the details were finalised we were told that the supervisor of the respective commissioners cancelled the cooperation without giving a reason. The same pattern ensued in Tuebingen (Baden-Wuerttemberg), Ansbach (Bavaria), Marburg (Hessia), and

elsewhere. Even charitable organisations rejected our enquiries in most cases. It took us much more time to find refugees we could access and who were willing to be interviewed than to actually conduct an interview. Gladly there were a few exceptions – usually from church-related charities – that granted us access to refugees they cared for. But still – we only got seven interviews. To say that we have totally missed our goal which was to have 25 interviews by summer last year is almost an understatement.

So, what could I do then? I found a scholar of Jewish studies, Jessica Hoesel, at the Heidelberg Centre for Jewish Studies who wrote her 2017 master thesis about religious tolerance among young refugees who arrived in Germany between 2010 and 2015.⁴ One focus of her interviews has been the tolerance towards Judaism. Therefore, she also conducted six interviews. Already for her it had proven hard to find refugees. But she did her work before anti-Semitism among a part of the refugees had become a matter of public interest – mostly due to a certain instrumentalization by the right-wing populist party AfD. We decided that we could merge our results, and so, the corpus now consists of 13 interviews in total – which is still only about half of the 25 interviews we wanted to achieve. Therefore, our results are not generalisable. But that has never been the goal, given our qualitative approach.

Traditional anti-Semitism

The most surprising result we had in my opinion was that we found not much of what is considered to be traditional anti-Semitism. Only few believed that all Jews were rich etc. On the other hand, we found several quite weird ideas about the Shoah, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other topics related to their thoughts about Jews which contained traditional patterns such as conspiracy theories.

⁴ Jessica Hösel: Religiöse Toleranz unter jungen Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund und der Umgang der Mehrheitsgesellschaft mit EinwanderInnen aus arabischen Ländern (Masterarbeit im Fach Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes an der Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg), 10. Juli 2017.

Shoah-related anti-Semitism

One thing that can be seen clearly in most of the interviews is a lack of knowledge about the past, about the Shoah, the Second World War. Out of the 13 interviewees only one or two studied German history on the basis of facts. One female Muslim from Syria, 19 years old, told Jessica Hoesel what she knew about the fate of the Jews – just to sum it up: Hitler at first told the Russians to kill the Jews but they fought back and killed the Russians together with Hitler because they were more efficient in their killings than the Germans. She added: “That’s a well-known story in our country.”⁵ It remains unclear whether she perhaps wants to actively oppose the mainstream German version of this “story” by saying that or whether she is only unaware of this historically correct version. Her story of the Shoah is a strange but massive reversal of perpetrator and victim.

Gunther Jikeli in his 2015 study on European Muslim anti-Semitism states that conspiracy theories about the Shoah are only a minor phenomenon among young Muslim males in Europe in general.⁶ However, in his 2017 study on anti-Semitism among refugees from Syria and Iraq in particular Jikeli found that false and often anti-Semitic ideas about the Shoah are more widespread among them.⁷ At least, two other Syrian refugees told us in a reflected way about lies they heard about the Shoah in Syrian schools and media. One with a Kurdish background also admitted that back home he knows people who read Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” and the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” voluntarily.

⁵ Hoesel, Appendix, p. 31.

⁶ Günther Jikeli: European Muslim Antisemitism. Why Young Urban Males Say They Don’t Like Jews, Bloomington/ Indianapolis 2015, p. 89.

⁷ Günther Jikeli: Einstellungen von Geflüchteten aus Syrien und dem Irak zu Integration, Identität, Juden und Shoah. Forschungsbericht Dezember 2017 (online: https://ajcberlin.org/sites/default/files/ajc_studie_gefluechtete_und_antisemitismus_2017.pdf (last checked: 23th March 2019)), p. 38-40.

The most problematic findings we had may be subsumed under the rubric

‘Israel-related anti-Semitism and Israel hostility’.

Our most extreme example of anti-Semitic attitudes was a male Sunni refugee from Syria, 22 years old, from whom I’ve taken the quotation in the title of my talk. He has learned to speak German fluently within one and a half years, using idioms etc. without any previous knowledge. Also, our interviewer stated she had the impression of an intelligent guy. Yes, the interviewer was female, indeed, and he had absolutely no problems with it. He even said he wants to be tolerant towards everyone irrespective of origin or religion. He told us he went to Buchenwald where he – in his own words – “mourned for the innocent Jews” murdered there.

The other side of the coin in his case was a very strong anti-Zionism. He demonised Zionism in an almost unbelievable way: “Zionists are for Judaism just like what is ISIS for Islam.” He conflated Jews and Zionists when he said: “We grow up learning that all Arabs have to become a unity [...] and then need to expulse the Jews [from Palestine] to get back the land.” When the interviewer asked him to name a difference between Jews and Zionists, he couldn’t provide any reasonable distinction – except “you can’t see the difference”.

Two topoi shared by about half of the interviewees were, first, “the Jews have taken the Palestinian land” and, secondly, the cruelty of either the Israeli army or of “the Israelis” in general. The latter one twice came with the trope of Israelis as “killing children”. One male Muslim refugee, 19 years old, from Syria who had lived in Abu Dhabi for a while and who appreciates the climate of tolerance in Germany said: “When talking about people, not all of them, but the army are bad. They like taking other land that is for Palestine. And they [kill] them every day and no one cares. Their children, their womens. They are just killing the

Palestinians with no reason. With no reason or little reason. Or they are not think they are just killing them.” (English original)⁸

Most of those refugees sharing hatred against Israel – depicting it as child murderer etc. – on the other hand considered themselves to be quite tolerant towards other religions, and actually they even were to some degree, e.g. they visited churches. If I were to sum it up I’d say: to think of oneself as a tolerant person, and even to be a such, doesn’t prevent one from being very anti-Zionist, from using anti-Semitic tropes to describe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given the propaganda influences in their countries of origin that seems to be true in particular also for refugees from Muslim countries.

Just one last example to underline that a bit: A Kurdish Interviewee from Syria who shows a lot of respect for Judaism and other religions and who is much in favour of Israel still repeated one false story he heard about Israel’s policy regarding the al-Aqsa Mosque: “they don’t allow Muslim prayers to go there, or only 50 per day”. He questioned most of the things he heard about Israel in Syria but obviously not everything. That shows that even someone who doesn’t have an anti-Semitic attitude overall can still be ensnared in the traps of false (and often stereotypically hostile) tales about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Reflections about anti-Israelism in the respective country of origin

Some of the refugees have shown a critical attitude towards the propaganda in their countries of origin spreading hatred against Jews and Israel. E.g. two male Syrian refugees of Kurdish background told us about the depiction of Jews and Israel in their home country – both in a way that clearly expressed their critical attitude towards the common media coverage on Jews and Israelis. One 25-year-old male Muslim with Kurdish roots and a comparably high education was in particular very critical – maybe he even exaggerated a bit when he stated that

⁸ Hösel, Appendix, p. 36.

75% of the school lessons in political science were propaganda against Israel. The only appearance of Jews he heard in school was that they constitute now Israel which has to be defeated. He hopes for a way of co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians, here “Israelis” in his view probably means the Jewish majority of them mainly. Implicitly he gave us an insight in the reason for his quite friendly attitude towards Jews. He compared the hostility of the Arabs and the Turkish towards the Jews with their hostility against his own, the Kurdish people. That can be better understood taking into consideration that he had to discontinue his studies at university and got even imprisoned briefly for his activities in a group of Kurdish culture at Damascus University. Here, we see a definite link between the biography of a refugee representing a minority in his country of origin and his attitude towards Judaism and Israel. But he even added that to accept a Jewish state might be even more difficult for the mentality of Arab states than to accept a Kurdish state. One has not to agree here, of course, but he appears not only to be quite reflective but also to identify his own Kurdish fate almost exceedingly with the fate of the Jewish population in Israel.

Both Iranian interviewees spoke about the regime’s indoctrination to believe in the “brotherhood” with the Palestinians and to hate Israel and Zionists. One indicated that this indoctrination would have been so obvious that a lot of Iranians would think about it critically whereas the other stated that open criticism of the irrational hatred against Israel could have been punished, and therefore, he had kept silent about it.

Minority representatives

Refugees who were part of a religious or ethnic minority in their countries of origin or who recently converted in Germany showed fewer anti-Semitic attitudes. Among these refugees I could identify three groups:

1. Traditional Christian minorities in the Middle East: we had one Mandaean and one Catholic Christian, both male and from Iraq. Both were tolerant towards Judaism, but both have shown an undifferentiated view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
2. People for the Kurdish minority, all male, both from Syria and Iraq. As mentioned above they were usually not only tolerant towards Judaism but even very positive about the existence of the state of Israel – partially because they identify with this special country in the Middle East. Nevertheless, one of them lacked practically any substantial knowledge.
3. Among the interviewees there are two former Muslims who converted to (Evangelical) Christianity and one who seemed to be very interested in Christianity, perhaps intending to be baptised in the future. These Christian converts described a recent shift in their attitudes towards Jews. Ironically, they now don't mix Judaism with Israel any longer – as admittedly taught at home – but with the Israelites from the Old Testament which leads to a strong identification with the fate of the modern state of Israel.

Already a study on refugees in Bavaria, published by the Hanns Seidel Foundation in April 2017, stated that anti-Semitism among refugees is dependent on their religious backgrounds: more than half of the Muslim participants of their study agreed that Jews would have too much influence on a global scale whereas less than a quarter of the Christian participants shared that position.⁹ This study was conducted among 779 refugees in Bavaria from Syria, Iraq, Eritrea and Afghanistan – as far as I am aware it is the largest study since 2015 that asked recent refugees in particular about their view on Jews. Unfortunately, they included only one question about that. Nevertheless, our findings in our tiny study fits well into their results. The most problematic utterances came from Arab Sunni Muslims – although not all of them which should

⁹ Sonja Haug et al.: Asylsuchende in Bayern. Eine quantitative und qualitative Studie, published by Hanns Seidel Foundation, Munich 2017 (online: https://www.hss.de/download/publications/Asylsuchende_in_Bayern.pdf (last checked: 23rd March 2019)), p. 68f.

be a little caveat for over-generalisation. Furthermore, just as their studies found out we can in general confirm that educational or social status has only a minor impact on the perceptions of Jews. But: education has an impact. E.g. I wouldn't trace the refusal of women to talk about politics which we have experienced not only to their potential female role perceptions but even more to the fact that they were less educated.

Lack of reliable knowledge

Lack of knowledge seems to me to be a rather big problem: a male Kurdish refugee with only minor education who showed sympathy for the existence of Israel and who rejected lies he had heard about the Shoah in his country of origin, Syria, confused the term "anti-Semitism". He thought, indeed, that this were a term to describe the attitude of being against hatred towards Jews. So, our interviewer explained the terminology for him after the interview.

Several of the refugees said they didn't have a lot of information. They quite often quoted social media, especially Facebook, as a source for their knowledge about the Shoah and Israel. Some like a Mandaean refugee from Iraq admitted themselves that their sources were not reliable – although in his case he even got the facts about the Shoah historically correct. With only one exception all of those who said that they had no or only little knowledge about Judaism as a religion, the Shoah and Israel found their lack of knowledge deficient for themselves and were willing to learn more about it if there were given the opportunity to do so.

What needs to be done?

I find it quite astonishing that most of the refugees whom we and Jessica Hoesel interviewed lamented their lack of knowledge about Judaism (and sometimes about other religions and cultures in general). At least for those cases it should be comparably easy to provide a in the so-called integration classes (*Integrationskurse*). I know about projects which established some lectures about homosexuality and the right o women in Germany in these classes – so why not

also about anti-Semitism? Whether these classes are of any reasonable value is a different question I can't answer. But I believe education is key. Nevertheless, I want to be honest: I believe it will need a lot of time.

We also should stand on the side of those among the Muslim immigrant groups who like Ahmad Mansour, an Arab Israeli, in Berlin strongly oppose all forms of anti-Semitism in part of the Muslim communities in Germany. Some radical leftists in Germany – perhaps slightly comparable to some British leftist arguments – accused him of supporting racism against immigrants from the Near and Middle East. That's definitely not helpful.

What certainly needs to be done is to deal with the problem of a widespread anti-Semitism among a strong minority or – more likely – a majority of the recent refugees. We should not make the fault to leave this problem to rightist parties – in Germany the AfD – as a means of externalising their own problem with anti-Semitism. I personally believe that there should be an interest for this topic also in the mainstream parties of the German political spectrum.