ORA JOINT RESEARCH PROJECT
"Muslim-Jewish encounter, diversity & distance in urban Europe: Religion, culture and social model"

ENCOUNTERS Executive summary, November 2024

Muslim-Jewish encounter, diversity and distance in urban Europe: Religion, culture and social model (ENCOUNTERS) **is an Open Research Area for the Social Sciences (ORA) project funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR; France), Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG; Germany), and UKRI Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC; UK). Its partners are: Birkbeck University of London, Durham University, Göttingen University, Heidelberg University, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious & Ethnic Diversity, Sciences Po Bordeaux / Sciences Po Paris, and the University of Strasbourg. PIs: Anne-Sophie Lamine (FR), Steve Vertovec (DE), Ben Gidley (UK).**

ENCOUNTERS' **research objectives** were to *understand the nature of encounter* in urban Europe, both as lived experience and as a perception from the inside and the outside, and to develop *a robust typology* of forms of positive, negative and ambivalent encounter and the strategies enacted to produce these. *ENCOUNTERS* was a **multi-methods project**. It included semi-structured interviews, ethnographic participant observation, a telephone survey, documentary analysis and media analysis. It included four research **work packages**: on the ethnography of everyday life (led by Ben Gidley and coordinated by Sami Everett), on media (Anne-Sophie Lamine), on intra-group attitudes (Nonna Mayer with Vincent Tiberj), and the governance of religious and cultural diversity (Matthias Koenig with Alexander-Kenneth Nagel).

Fieldwork sites

- **Berlin:** Steve Vertovec, Dekel Peretz
- **Frankfurt:** Matthias Koenig, Arndt Emmerich
- **London:** Ben Gidley, Daniella Shaw
- **Manchester:** Yulia Egorova, Alyaa Ebbiary
- **Paris:** Nonna Mayer, Elodie Druez
- **Strasbourg:** Anne-Sophie Lamine, Anis Fariji, Hande Senguler, Lalia Schmitt

In addition to our partner universities, over the course of the project meetings of the research team have been generously hosted by the French Museum for the History of Immigration, and the Berlin Institute for Islamic Theology at Humboldt University.

Findings

Dynamics of encounter:

> Jewish/Muslim encounter occurs across a vast range of domains, from commerce to culture, from street life to the town hall, although it is often not explicitly named as "Jewish/Muslim", which highlights the slipperiness and ambiguity of these classifications. *We are sharply aware of the ways in which the trope of "Jewish/Muslim encounter" can essentialise the complex lives and identifications of our participants*, and that our research carries ethical risks.

We identified several **patterns or types of encounter**, ranging from hostility and conflict to conviviality and cohesion. The most common patterns, however, are *ambivalence, indifference and avoidance*. In neighbourhoods where both Jews and Muslims live, relations are most frequently marked by *living "together apart"* – side by side but not together.

We observed the **significance of internal diversity within communities**. There is no singular discrete and homogeneous "Jewish community" or "Muslim community" in any of our cities, but instead unstable, internally plural formations marked by their own normative mainstreams and margins, relative insiders and outsiders, power imbalances, and by differences of denomination, ethnicity, language, migration background, degree of religiosity, and political orientation, intersecting with diversity along several lines including gender, sexuality, age and class.

- *Internal differences and intracommunal encounters* are often significant in opening or closing intercultural encounters.
- *Engagement in interfaith and intercultural activity can itself make a difference to intracommunal politics*, for example in conferring or contesting communal legitimacy.

We observed the significance of unique ***personal and interpersonal stories*** that both followed and defied these patterns. In particular, we found the importance of:

- The *role of brokers*, sometimes powerful insiders and sometimes relative outsiders in their own communities, who play a key part in creating (and sometimes gatekeeping) opportunities for meaningful **entrepreneurs of encounter**.
- The role of *stable cross-communal relationships*, often forged in long-term civil society or municipal structures and initiatives, which can appear at first to be superficial, policy-driven and performative, but which also allow for the slow cultivation of trust over time, which can be mobilised in particular at times of emergency.

We found a range of ***individual and collective strategies*** in relation to encounter, including:

- Strategies of *conflict avoidance*, in which various "elephants in the room" (in particular relating to the Middle East) are made taboo in order to sustain fragile positive relations.

- Strategies of *performance*, in which national and municipal cognitive frames and policy discourses provide scripts which local actors can perform in order to maintain social positions within the political landscape (including for funding opportunities).
- Strategies of *self-interested coalition-building* (including across apparently starkly antagonistic political divides), in which actors seek out interlocutors and allies from across cultural or communal lines to pursue their own or common goals, for example to legitimate their role in relation to municipal structures, to deflect allegations of intolerance, or to secure shared objectives around religious and cultural needs.
- Strategies of *ethical solidarity*, in which, sometimes out of theological commitment, values of care and empathy are enacted, for example in response to racist acts against the other.

Crucially, these dynamics of encounter do not take place in a purely bilateral context but always in relation to a European *societal ethos structured by the power of* **the secular-Christian majority** *and the (local and national) secular-Christian state*.

- Muslim/Jewish encounter is rarely untouched by the central role of *local and national state/ governance*.
- Jews and Muslims have differential and assymetrical *relationships to discourses of national belonging and racialisation*.

The role of community media: The project intensively analysed Jewish and Muslim community media in each of our three countries during the fieldwork period. We found enormous variations from country to country, but also significant common discourses, figures and patterns. These are shaped by the same *national discursive repertoires and cognitive frames* that we observed in the municipal governance of religious and cultural diversity, and both shape and reflect (but are sometimes at odds with) the attitudes circulating and practices enacted in our field sites. We identified the following discourses:

- *Communities standing together* – images of brothers/ sisters in interfaith; shared religious needs; the figure of the ordinary other (the neighbour, the shopkeeper) as proof of coexistence; and a stronger discourse of intercommunal solidarity.
- *Solidarity with the other as victim* – recognition of the other as a victim: of racism in general, of its own extremists, of extreme nationalists, or of politicians. This includes the figure of the *fellow* victim of racism and terrorism.
- *Competitive indifference and non-solidarity* – the other is seen as acting for their own sake. For instance, the non-solidarity of the other is denounced when "we" face racism or "unjust" political action.
- *Competitive victimhood/framing the other as a privileged minority* – discourses of "Islamo-leftism" (in France), claims that "Jews don't count" (especially in the UK), or that Jews are privileged in a "hierarchy of racisms" (all three countries).
- *The exceptional other* – individuals or groups who can be singled out as critical of their own religion/community – for instance, "good", "moderate" Muslims who speak against Muslim antisemitism or Islamism, or "good", anti-Zionist Jews who speak against Israel – are frequently praised in community media.

The determinants of encounter:

We identified a number of determinants of the patterning of encounter. These occur at several *levels or scales* which are *analytically separate but impossible to disentangle in practice*, as they are always already mutually interdependent.

In each of our three countries we observed the importance of *the **interpenetration of geopolitics in the local***, and it is a key finding of the project that *a transnational perspective is required to understand local Jewish/Muslim encounters*. The key *global and transnational factors* that determine patterns of encounter are:

- *Geopolitics/soft power*: The presence of the Israel/Palestine conflict to Jewish and Muslim life in Europe was a constantly arising feature of our research. Although solidarity activism creates some opportunities for positive encounter, and responding to the conflict motivates several interfaith and intercultural initiatives, most often Israel/Palestine disrupts and closes down emerging and even long-term relationships. This intensifies when the conflict escalates, but also de-intensifies in contexts where Israel/Palestine is less salient.
- *Diasporic formations*: Jews are a paradigmatically diasporic population, and European Muslims are also often members of diasporic formations. Their cultural lives are therefore shaped by lateral connections and identification across diaspora as well by orientation to the real and imagined homelands.
- *Sending country politics*: Many of our research participants are transnationally networked and embedded in transnational social space, and states and institutions of sending countries continue to play a role in their lives in Europe.
- *Transnational faith organisation*: Similarly, Jewish and Muslim denominational affiliations are often transnational, and global religious institutions were active in our field sites.

The key *national factors* that determine patterns of encounter are:

- *National-level policy and political repertoires* – such as republican *laïcité* in France, integration and corporative *hinkende trennung* (limping secularism) in Germany or cohesion and conservative pluralism in the UK – have a profound

role in determining the structure of institutional interfaith activity locally. But they also help open or close possibilities of encounter beyond formal structures, by determining the available language in which to make claims, and articulate conflict or build coalitions. For example, communities of faith are regular stakeholders in municipal activity in the UK but seen as "communitarian" and suspect in France.

- *Colonial histories* are an often-overlooked factor in shaping Muslim and Jewish encounters in Europe, as colonial histories both bind and separate the two populations. .

Although our three-country study brought national level differences into view, working in six cities we were able to see the extent to which national models are belied by variations at a local level, enabling us to go beyond the methodological nationalism of previous studies. The key **local factors** that determine patterns of encounter are:

- *Policy framing at local level* was found to be a consistently important factor across our cities. Local (and in some cases regional) policy frames depart from national ones in important ways.
- *Municipal–level narratives and memory cultures* are also important.
- The presence or absence of *key entrepreneurs of encounter and of particular sustained human relationships* also makes a difference. For example, a single charismatic individual who brokers positive contacts can create conditions that cannot be explained solely by structural factors – but the weight of this responsibility can in turn lead to burn-out.

Within each of our cities we also conducted fieldwork at a *neighbourhood* level, in areas with demographically and/or symbolically significant Muslim *and* Jewish presence. The **key micro-local facto**rs that determine patterns of encounter are:

- Features of *urban morphology* – the physical shape of the neighbourhood, the density and flows of settlement and commerce – can make a difference to the patterning of encounter.
- Urban change and in particular *gentrification* emerged as important in several of our sites. Visible minority presence (e.g. Middle Eastern or South Asian food cultures) and sites of cultural memory (e.g. former synagogues) can play a role in areas becoming high value "cultural quarters", opening up commercial opportunities in which Muslim/Jewish encounter might be a marketable asset, but also leading to minority residents being displaced.
- *Neighbourhood-level narratives and memory cultures*: As at the municipal level, the presence or absence of endogamous micro-local stories or memories of shared culture and history make a significant difference to the possibility of positive encounter.

At the level of the *individual and interpersonal*, we found:

- The central importance of *ambivalence* rather than positive or negative attitudes to the other. In particular, we frequently observed a *gap between discourse and practice*. Research participants who articulate positive attitudes to the other do not necessarily experience meaningful positive relations in practice; conversely, long-term, trusting and intimate relations emerged among participants who held quite negative representations of the other.
- *Non-verbal registers* – embodied/corporeal, musical, gastronomic – are harnessed in shared sensorial experience (hearing, seeing, tasting), carrying affective power due to intercommunal histories of migration and emerging as a site for staged encounter: in food, music-making, and artistic initiatives. The emotional power of such experience – in which ascribed identities can be valorised but also forgotten – underlies the ambivalence of encounters and the gap between language and life, and grounds an emerging European urban micro-level memory culture that uses transmigrant stories to generate conviviality and cohesion.

For further information and full report:
https://www.mmg.mpg.de/640536/encounters-ora-joint-research-project