

## Jewish-Muslim relations have been affected by European public and political discourse

*Jewish-Muslim relations are often constructed in the public discourse as problematic due to the conflict in the Middle East. Based on her recent study conducted with Jewish and Muslim participants in the UK with Fiaz Ahmed, **Yulia Egorova** suggests that Jewish-Muslim relations are instead shaped by and, at the same time, reflect wider public attitudes towards 'minority communities' in general and towards Jews and Muslims in particular.*



A Synagogue and Mosque in Whitechapel, London. Image: Flickr, Cory Doctorow

It appears that for many British Jews and British Muslims, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia constitute a significant factor that determines their place in the vexed picture of Jewish-Muslim relations in Europe, and it can be argued that the social hesitation that some British Jews and British Muslims have against each other is a **symptom of wider problems** in the way 'minority' groups are perceived and treated in society.

Both personal and historical experiences of discrimination were frequently referred to in our respondents' accounts of their view of Jewish-Muslim relations and of their perception of the other group. In the case of the Jewish communities, historical and personal memories and experiences of discrimination, combined with exposure to public and mass media discourses that construct Muslims as a security threat in general, and a threat for Jewish persons and organisations in particular, forces some members of the Jewish constituency to view Muslims with suspicion. The responses that we received from our Jewish interviewees about their experiences of interactions with British Muslims were positive, however, almost every respondent talked about the concern present in their congregations. It is clear that some of their hesitation stems from the rhetoric of the 'war on terror' that is common in the mainstream mass media and public discourse, and is not at all limited to the Jewish constituency.

Similarly, the postcolonial experiences of Muslims in Europe, and, particularly, after the events of 9/11 and 7/7, have predisposed Muslims to be doubtful about their future in Europe. When it comes specifically to their relations with their Jewish counterparts, this overall feeling of **insecurity**

sometimes intersects both with time-old anti-Jewish stereotypes and conspiracy theories, and with a reaction to public discourses that stigmatize the Muslim community. For instance, some of our Muslim respondents talked about British Jews as more ‘successful’ citizens, who were ‘ahead’ of British Muslims in terms of their organization and relationship with the authorities. The trope of Jewish people being ‘successful’ and ‘ahead’ in other contexts would have read as an anti-Semitic stereotype, however, in this case, our Muslim respondents, many of whom emphasized that now European Muslims were going through what European Jews had experienced earlier in the century, used it to describe their own condition of discrimination.

What appears to be equally problematic for the development of Jewish-Muslim dialogue is the **mass media constructing** Muslims as the enemies of the Jews and leveling blanket accusations of anti-Semitism at the entire Muslim community, as well as presenting the attacks on Jewish persons and property where perpetrators were Muslim as further evidence of Muslim immigrants’ susceptibility to extremist ideologies and failure to integrate or **portraying Jewish people as potential ‘allies’** of European Christians in the fight against the ‘Islamisation’ of Europe.

These examples show that while in the past, Jews and Muslims in Europe were put together into **one category of a threatening other**, in recent decades their identities have become polarized in the European public and political discourse, which created a rhetorical dichotomy between the ‘well-integrated’ and ‘law-abiding’ Jews and the ‘violent’ and ‘inassimilable’ Muslims. Though on the face of it this discourse constructs Jews and Muslims as members of two opposing categories, it still at the same time portrays them both as the ‘other’, even though it associates with them different imageries of alterity. In contemporary European imagination, Jews and Muslims are thus both juxtaposed as social groups allegedly adhering to radically different cultural values and religious practices, but at the same are also conflated as static and unchanging minorities who, no matter how different they may be from each other, are also unmistakably unlike the mainstream society.

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It would not be at all surprising if such generalisations that essentialise both traditions, but construe Judaism as more compatible with life in Europe than Islam, were detrimental to Jewish-Muslim relations and we saw multiple examples of this in our research. For instance, one of my Jewish research participants involved in inter-community work reported that young Muslims sometimes felt embarrassed about getting involved because they thought they would be expected to reveal anti-Semitic views. Another respondent observed that Muslims felt they had to be extra careful about taking part in Jewish-Muslim interfaith events, as they were worried that if the topic of Israel came up, their comments could be seen as inappropriately negative and lead to their arrest.

Our research unsettles those understandings of Jewish-Muslims relations that see them as dependent entirely on the actions of Jews and Muslims enacting these relations or actions of agents constructed as their proxy, such as the State of Israel, Muslim majority states, or different groups and organization identified as Jewish or Muslim. Instead the context of Jewish-Muslim relations highlights how the expectations and social hesitation that different ‘minority’ communities have about the way they will be treated by each other are an important indicator of the level of socio-political comfort that they experience in relation to the mainstream society.

*This article is based on a paper by Yulia Egorova and Fiaz Ahmed, “The Impact of Antisemitism and Islamophobia on Jewish-Muslim Relations in the UK: Memory, Experience, Context” in Ben Gidley and James Renton, eds., **Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe: A Shared Story?** due out in December.*



### About the author



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