CHAPTER 4

# Precarious Companionship

## *Discourses of Adversity and Commonality in Jewish-Muslim Dialogue Initiatives in Germany*

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## 1 Introduction

"Jewish community leaves Council of Religions", reported the *Jüdische Allgemeine* (04.08.2014), a German-speaking Jewish newspaper.[1] The Jewish community in Frankfurt had decided to leave the Council after internal conflicts about antisemitic statements by Muslim representatives. The former president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Dieter Graumann, blamed Muslim associations for their idleness in response to antisemitism; while the Central Council had always spoken on behalf of Muslims in Germany, now Muslims supposedly failed to show their solidarity with Jews. Even though the Jewish community re-joined the Council of Religions three years later, the incident points to the fragility of organized interreligious relations in general and the ambivalence of Jewish-Muslim relations in particular.

Muslims and Jews are an integral part of interreligious activism in Germany; in fact, the neologism 'trialogue' has emerged to denote the usual 'Abrahamic' configuration of interreligious encounter (Schweitzer 2019). A common denominator in this triangular setting is the prominence (not to say hegemony) of Christian actors and contents vis-à-vis Jews and Muslims as religious minorities. The relationship between Christians and Muslims is often based on a notion of difference and a certain impetus of integration. In contrast, the relationship between Christians and Jews is often marked by a notion of unity, which takes form under the rubric of shared Judeo-Christian roots and may be associated with a paternal form of religious inclusivism.

The third relationship in this triangle, i.e. between Jews and Muslims, is affected by the different relationships to majority Christian society and the state as well as other factors. In theological terms, they share a stricter notion of monotheism as compared to Christians; in global political terms, local

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Jewish-Muslim encounter takes place in the shadow of the Middle East conflict as well as radical Islamic terror attacks in Europe; in domestic political terms, they pursue similar interests, i.e. regarding circumcision and halal or kosher butchering.

In this article, we explore how this multi-layered setting shapes Jewish-Muslim relations within interreligious initiatives in Germany. In our understanding, interreligious *activities* are organized events of encounter between adherents of at least two religious traditions which are based on a programmatic notion of religious difference (Nagel 2019, 112). Interreligious *initiatives* are institutional collectives which plan and carry out these events. Our focus on organized encounters promises insights into the institutional logic of Jewish-Muslim interaction. In the following, we will briefly embed our approach in the state of Germany-based research on interreligious dialogue and touch on debates about Muslim antisemitism and Jewish-Muslim relations. In section two, we will elaborate on our methods and research design, and use sections three and four to discuss discourses of adversity and commonality between Jews and Muslims in two different dialogue settings in some more detail. In section five, we provide a comparative discussion and conclusion.

Scholarly debates on interreligious dialogue have long fallen under the purview of systematic or practical theology, whereas in recent years we have seen the emergence of a new strand of discussion from the vantage points of sociology and social anthropology. In the *theological branch* of the debate, earlier contributions explored the religious content and foundations of interreligious understanding or aimed at a more comprehensive theology of religions without focusing specifically on Jewish-Muslim relations (Hick 2002; Knitter et al. 2013). Recently, a special issue on Muslim-Jewish dialogue was published. The editors suggest that the marginal nature of Jewish-Muslim dialogue is rooted in "political interests" rather than "religious differences." (Riemer et al. 2016, 8).

Another recent anthology collects a wide range of historical analyses on "the contributions of Jews and Muslims to the history of Europe" (Aslan and Rausch 2019, v). The authors explore the myth of interreligious conviviality in Al-Andalus and its implications for Jewish-Muslim relations in contemporary Europe. One essay critically refers to the notion of 'trialogue' as some "well intended and positive idea of including the three religions at the same time – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – [which] is more an image, a symbol or an ideal than a practical reality" (Schweitzer 2019, 216). Another essay addresses the hegemonic foundations of European discourses on the "integration" of Jewish and Muslim minorities in a similar deconstructive vein (Bodenheimer 2019).

Apart from the research on Jewish-Muslim relations in the framework of interreligious dialogue, *social scientists* have addressed the complex

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relationship between Jews and Muslims. Some authors scrutinize the function of Muslim antisemitism in terms of community and German nation building (Dantschke 2010). Others focus on how Jewish-Muslim encounters on the local level challenge national narratives (Becker 2019). The superdiversity (Vertovec 2007) of Jews and Muslims in Germany comes to light in works focusing on subgroups such as Israelis and Palestinians (Atshan and Galor 2020). This superdiversity is also highlighted in works on the function of memorial culture and Holocaust commemoration in competition or empathy with the victimhood of other groups. For example, refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan perceive the Holocaust as giving them a universal language to express their own suffering (Arnold and König 2018). In contrast, Palestinians feel that German memorial culture does not leave space for their own victimhood (Atshan and Galor 2020, 22–24).

The possibility of a shared minority consciousness and experience with politics of social inclusion and exclusion is expressed in the research of Yurdakul and Bodemann on how Turkish immigrants relate to Jews as a prototypical minority to claim group rights. They note that "Turkish leaders in Germany use the German Jewish trope to establish associational ties, organize campaigns against antisemitism and racism, and make claims to German state authorities" (Yurdakul und Bodemann 2006). In another contribution, Yurdakul uses debates on circumcision to showcase how different (legal, medical and media) discourses work together in stigmatizing and criminalizing Jews and Muslims as religious and ethnic minorities. She suggests "to critically look at how social actors of minority groups challenge the existing socio-legal discourses through their religious practices and bodily performances" (Yurdakul 2016, S. 84). As our research will show, these challenges are not reserved to the religious domain. They should be perceived within a broader contemporary discussion questioning the seemingly natural distinction between Germans and migrants in a 'postmigrant society,' in which migration stands for a broad spectrum of diversity issues, and question of identity, belonging and representation are tenaciously renegotiated. (Yildiz 2018; Foroutan 2018).

For our own approach, each strand of the interdisciplinary state of research on Jewish-Muslim relations offers an important facet: Social scientific debates on interreligious dialogue point to the power asymmetries and pitfalls of representation, which shape organized interreligious encounter. It translates into the question: "who speaks on behalf of whom?" Another important aspect is the ceremonial nature of interreligious dialogue, which raises the question "who is put on stage for which audience?" Finally, debates on Jewish-Muslim conflict and companionship underline the ambivalence of their relationship, which may be articulated in discourses of adversity as well as commonality.

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In the following, we set out to analyse these discourses in two different spheres of interreligious dialogue. The first sphere is local dialogue initiatives in the Ruhr area, based on a rationale of 'trialogue' or 'world religions.' The metropolitan area Rhine Ruhr is one of the biggest urban agglomerations in Continental Europe and marked by a high degree of religious diversity (Hero et al. 2008). The second sphere is translocal dialogue activities in which supposedly only Muslims and Jews are involved. Our sample reflects two different time periods: 2012 when the circumcision debate was prominent, and 2020 when dialogue as many other spheres of life had moved on to digital platforms due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 2 Methods and Data

In this article, we rely on two case studies to analyse how Jewish-Muslim relations are being framed in organized interreligious dialogue initiatives. In doing so, we put particular emphasis on the discourses of adversity and commonality that can be observed and the tropes that are being used to transgress or highlight interreligious boundaries.

In the first case we focus on local interreligious dialogue initiatives in the Ruhr area. The dialogue initiatives in our sample organize a variety of interreligious activities including roundtables, peace prayers, neighbourhood meetings or bigger events (see Nagel 2012 for a systematic comparison). While all these activities are built on the idea of creating tolerance and trust through interreligious understanding, they differ as to their guiding notion of religious diversity. For instance, neighbourhood meetings address all religious groups in a given area and hence exhibit a higher degree of intrareligious diversity whereas classical dialogue formats usually involve a distinct pattern of 'Abrahamic' or 'world religious' representation. Typically, the activities involve an elderly educated middle-class audience and an academic or ecclesiastical pattern of social interaction, e.g. panels, talks, moderated discussion or a joint ritual performance based on a clear protocol.

Data gathering for the first case mainly took place in the years 2011 and 2012. The database consists of 27 semi-structured interviews with religious representatives who were engaged in local interreligious activism. The interviews were conducted in different large and middle-sized towns in the Ruhr area including Bochum, Bottrop, Dortmund, Duisburg, Gelsenkirchen, Hamm, Marl, Recklinghausen, Unna and Witten. The interview guidelines focused on a) the scope of activities in which a community was involved, b) the motivation for interreligious participation and c) the relationship between the

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different religious communities. The relationship between Muslims and Jews was not part of the guidelines; nevertheless, many actors deliberately offered comments and reflections in this regard. On the one hand, this general observation reflects the relevance of Jewish-Muslim relations in the wider interreligious network; on the other hand, it was a result of the circumcision debate, which reached a climax in 2012.

In the second case study, we focus on digital encounters and the representation of dialogue specifically between Jews and Muslims. These did not aim to bring together local communities, but rather target multipliers such as students, professionals, or intellectuals. They were designed as ideal examples, encouraging local communities to initiate Jewish-Muslim dialogue. The underlying assumption in providing guidance by example is that encounters between Jews and Muslims are rare and conflicted thus requiring careful navigation and moderation. A further anomaly that seems to call for special guidance is the supposed exclusion of the Christian majority from the conversation.

These digital dialogue formats were originally designed as panel discussions taking place in different cities in Germany organised by three different initiatives, which were all confronted at an early stage with the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic on travel and public gatherings. In accordance with global trends, they quickly adopted digital formats – mainly video-conferences on social media. They retained the panel discussion format while the audience became more anonymous and translocal. The initiative Schalom Aleikum was started by the Central Council of Jews in Germany with support from the federal government but without an official institutional Muslim partner. The name of the program is a hybridization of the Hebrew and Arabic greeting "peace be with you" implying a cultural affinity between Jews and Muslims. The second initiative is called Karov-Qareeb – Jewish-Muslim Think Tank using the respective Hebrew and Arabic words for proximity. It is a spin off by the Jewish and Muslim academic scholarship funds (ELES and Avicenna) from the interfaith student encounter and exchange program Dialogperspektiven. The last initiative, called Days of Jewish-Muslim Core Culture, was a series of events curated by the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, known for promoting matters of diversity.

We think of our *comparative approach* as a 'Most Different Systems' research design (see Anckar 2008) as both cases are forms of organized interreligious encounter, but differ in a lot of other dimensions, such as their time period, localization, religious scope, audience and the dominant pattern of interaction (see table 4.1). In such a design, we would expect different expressions of the ambivalence of the Jewish-Muslim relationship with regard to the forms

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TABLE 4.1 Case studies: comparative overview

| | **Local interreligious dialogue** | **Digital Jewish-Muslim dialogue** |
|---|---|---|
| *Time period* | 2011/12; circumcision debate | 2020/21; Covid-19 pandemic |
| *Localization* | Localized, city or district level; in-person | Translocal, digital |
| *Religious scope* | 'Abrahamic', 'world religious' | Jewish-Muslim |
| *Audience/ participants* | Elderly educated middle class | Invisible online audience, intellectual elite, professional groups |
| *Pattern of interaction* | Academic or ecclesiastical | Academic, ecclesiastical, diversity politics |

and proportion of discourses of adversity and commonality and the tropes or myths of difference and unity which they draw on.

In terms of data analysis, we relate to a tradition of discourse analysis, rooted in the Sociology of Knowledge (Keller 2011). In doing so, we analyse both the content structure and the narrative performance of our data to identify relevant tropes and strands of discourse on the relationship between Jews and Muslims in Germany. Following up on the initial critical remarks on 'trialogue' as a specific framework for organized interreligious encounter, we also carefully look at the configuration between various speakers and audiences. Our analysis of interreligious discourses on Jewish-Muslim relations departs from the contrast between discourses of adversity and discourses of commonality. It is important to note here that we deliberately use this dichotomist distinction as a heuristic tool to elucidate various discursive strands and tropes.

## 3 Jewish-Muslim Relations in Local Interreligious Dialogue

### 3.1 *Case Study Settings*

The first case is Jewish-Muslim relations as part of local interreligious activities in the Ruhr area. These activities are single (or a series of) events, which bring together adherents of different religious traditions in a format of discussion

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and exchange or mutual religious practice. Classic formats of interreligious dialogue usually involve a panel discussion by representatives of religious communities on dogmatic (sin, the relation between man and the divine) or ethical questions (care for elderly people, gender roles). In contrast, other activities, such as peace prayers and neighbourhood meetings, seek to create strong symbols of interreligious conviviality through joint religious practice or local festivals. Regardless of the format and the guiding notion of religious diversity ('Abrahamic' or 'world religions'), Jewish and Muslim participants are an integral part of the interreligious setting.

At the same time, they face similar organizational challenges: whereas the Christian mainline churches have professionalized their interreligious engagement by appointing regional commissioners, local Jewish and Muslim communities often lack the resources and the critical mass to participate in interreligious activities on eye level. In addition, both communities spend many of their resources to cope with issues relating to the migration background of their members (Kiesel 2007). Today, most of the members of Jewish communities in Germany have immigrated from former Soviet states where they were highly restricted in practicing their religion. Consequently, Jewish communities have been busy supporting not only the structural and social integration of their members, but also their religious education. Likewise, Muslim communities are not only places of worship, but also welfare organizations (Halm und Sauer 2015). In the data for the first case, several interview partners note the absence of Jewish actors and argue that the Holocaust has destroyed all forms of Jewish community life in Germany, which now needs to be reorganized from scratch. The discourse on Muslim actors is not so much about absence, but about reliability and qualification. Some of our interlocutors express their regret about the fluctuation of Muslim dialogue partners or their lack of German language skills.

In sum, both Jewish and Muslim communities are expected to participate in interreligious activities based on a rationale of 'Abrahamic' or 'world religious' completeness. It seems that Jewish communities often respond to the dissonance between expectation and capacities by not sending a representative at all whereas Muslim communities feel a stronger urge to participate in order to counter anti-Muslim resentment (Rückamp 2021). In some cases, these external expectations are channelled through local political or administrative authorities who are involved in interreligious initiatives. In our sample, state actors, such as the mayor, urban planners, police and integration officers, took part in several activities. Their role ranged from passive involvement over technical assistance to active forms of mediation and networking. In some cases, they even arranged their own interreligious events, such as a reception

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in the town hall or the initiation of a new interreligious roundtable in a multicultural district. Regardless of their degree of intervention, the presence of these actors constitutes a public stage for interreligious activism, which also shapes the ambivalent relationship between Jews and Muslims as we show in the following subsection.

### 3.2 *Discourses of Adversity*

In our data, we identified three main strands of adversity discourse: dialogue under the shadow of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Muslim antisemitism and a distinction between different stages of Jewish-Muslim encounter. Similar to the initial example of the Council of Religions in Frankfurt, many of our interlocutors pointed to the *Palestinian-Israeli conflict* as a major challenge for Jewish-Muslim encounter in Germany. A Jewish spokesperson illustrates how global conflicts overshadow the outreach activities of the local synagogue:

> Last year, we offered guided tours and then there were people who said: 'but there are these conflicts between Israel and Palestine. What is the stance of your community to that and what do the members of your community think?' … And then I say: 'The people who live here in Germany are German Jews. Even when they have immigrated, they do not come from Israel and if they did come from Israel then they had a reason. You cannot blame the people here for what is happening in the world.'

The statement is based on a clear distinction between Jews in Germany and Israel. In the opinion of our interview partner, "German Jews" should not be held responsible for what happens in Israel. Some have no attachment at all, and others even left the country in protest against Israeli politics. This approach is provincial in the sense that it seeks to 'purify' encounter by disentangling the local and global relevance structure of being Jewish. A similar strategy of purification relies on the demarcation of the 'political nature' of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in contrast to the 'religious nature' of local encounter (Nagel 2019; Riemer et al. 2016). In a similar vein, another Jewish representative holds that he would not usually put the transnational connections on display. "We are a German Jewish community, not some outpost of Israel," he claims. However, the fact that he decided to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Israel in a prominent setting, apparently upon an initiative of the local mayor, demonstrates the fluidity of discourses in accommodating contrasting expectations within the 'trialogue' framework.

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Outside of the Jewish spectrum, Muslim representatives in our sample did not address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict at all whereas Christian interview partners were very vocal and concerned about it. One Protestant pastor referred to an information event of the wider church district on the "Israel-Palestine conflict." On the one hand, he rejects the claim to boycott goods from Israel, on the other hand, he warns against "misjudging the Arab problem and ignoring the Palestinians' cry of distress [*Notschrei*]."

While the first strand of adversity discourse navigates the boundary between the local and the global as well as political and religious grounds of conflicts, a second strand is concerned with *Muslim antisemitism* in Germany. Our interlocutors report several instances of what they perceive to be Muslim resentments against Jews. A Jewish representative reflects on the role of national differences as he observes that North African mosque communities were more likely to take the Jewish side in contrast to Turkish communities, which organized solidarity events for Palestine. He attributes the differences to a stronger role of Turkish nationalism, which paves the way for imported antisemitism.

A Muslim representative of a local interreligious women council provides an interesting vignette of an Iftar (breaking the fast) event. A mosque community had extended a broad invitation for a joint Iftar. After a rumour had spread that a Jewish lady was participating, some of the Muslim women refused to sit and eat with her. Our interlocutor points out how her husband, a member of the community board, resolved the situation by offering an explanation for the dismissive behaviour: "What can I say? These are elderly people with a migration background who cannot read and write – not educated. These are simple people." The vignette illustrates how Muslim antisemitism may play out in a context of dialogue and commensality even in a community that is used to navigating interreligious settings. In contrast to the previous example, it refers to sociocultural factors, such as a lack of education, to explain antisemitic behaviour.

A third strand of adversity discourse is concerned with the *relevance of Muslim antisemitism on different stages of Jewish-Muslim encounter*. In this regard, a Jewish representative noted: "particularly within the Muslim community there are groups with which we would not sit at one table.… Which does not mean that there is no informal conversation, but I cannot officially sit at on table with people who are antisemites." The statement establishes a distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' contexts of organized Jewish-Muslim encounter and underlines that interreligious activism has a frontstage as well as a backstage. Religious communities are aware of that and consider it as part of their impression management in the urban environment. The involvement

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of public authorities enhances the visibility of interreligious activism and therefore may entail a more restrictive definition of boundaries.

### 3.3 *Discourses of Commonality*

In contrast to adversity discourse, discourses of commonality did not feature as strongly in our sample, which is surprising given the dialogical setting and the emphasis of a shared minority experience in the literature. Roughly, we could distinguish three strands of commonality discourse: common causes, common experiences, and theological reflections on conviviality.

Commonality through *common causes* refers to shared interests in terms of circumcision and ritual butchering. The director of an urban multicultural centre brings up the notion of a "Jewish-Muslim alliance on the local as well as on the federal level" since "as far as circumcision is concerned, they sit in the same boat." Another vignette sheds light on the implications of this alliance in everyday life: all kindergartens in a city in the central Ruhr had adopted a 'no pork' policy which led to a debate in the local Muslim community about different suppliers of halal meat. Some suggested avoiding a specific shop "since the owner is a Jew and you cannot eat that. And then I said: you know what? If he is Jewish, then you should only buy in his shop! They have 163 laws for ritual butchering while Muslims have three." Our interview partner evokes a sense of common interest to counter and overlay antisemitic resentments. In doing so, she pulls up a theological argument implying that the Jewish dietary rules are stricter than Islamic. Day-care too seems to be an important domain of Jewish-Muslim companionship. A Jewish spokesperson explains that the establishment of a Jewish kindergarten opens up new opportunities for interreligious dialogue: "We are a Jewish kindergarten with Christian, Jewish and Muslim children, but our staff as well is Christian, Jewish and Muslim; you will only find that here!"

A second strand refers to a *common minority experience* which Jews and Muslims share beyond concrete political interests. In the words of a spokesperson of a local Jewish community which organizes youth camps to empower adolescents to embrace their religious identity: "It is not always easy to become a Jew, or a minority, in a class where you are the only Jew or Muslim and the rest are Christian or neutral. And you are religious [*gläubig*] and it is not always easy." The statement indicates the structural similarity between the minority experience of Jewish and Muslim youth and subsumes it under the rubric of 'religious' vs. 'non-religious'.

In a similar vein, a Muslim interview partner reflects on historical parallels between Jews and Muslims in Germany: "When I look at the Weimar Republic, when I look at the media of that time, I realize that what they used to write

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about Jews back then, they now write about Islam, Muslims". The quotation is embedded in wider concerns about right-wing populism and xenophobia in Germany; in fact, the interlocutor decided to relocate to Turkey shortly after the interview. Unlike the first example, the trope of 'Muslims as the Jews of today' conveys a sense of commonality that is based on a notion of historical analogy rather than actual similarity. This may also affect the internal configuration of Jewish-Muslim relations: in the first case, Jews and Muslims are actors on eye-level whereas in the second case Muslims may consider themselves in need of symbolic protection and advocacy from the Jewish side.

A third strand of commonality discourse is rooted in *theological reflections on interreligious conviviality*. For instance, a Muslim representative in our sample refers to the notion of Jews and Christians as "People of the Book" [*ahl al-kitāb*]. She evokes the concept as a theological instance of religious tolerance, which creates a common ground for encounter between Jews and Muslims. In a similar vein, a Christian representative points to the Jewish background of Christianity: "Jesus was a Jew, Paul was a Jew, all the apostles, Maria, Josef, all Jews, of course. Did you think they were Christian or what? Afterwards they were Christians." The statement stands as an exemple for a strategy to establish commonality by recourse to common roots. At the same time, it underlines the challenges of a possessive inclusivism as it suggests that Judaism had somehow been 'resolved' by Christianity.

## 4 Jewish-Muslim Relations in Social Media

### 4.1 *Case Study Settings*

In our first case study we investigated discourses of commonality and adversity in local interreligious activities. Now we examine what happens when interreligious dialogue changes in two main respects: focus on direct dialogue between Jews and Muslims and transition into a digital space and social media. The focus on direct dialogue between Jews and Muslims in Germany seems to have started after the time span covered in our first case study. However, further research is necessary to determine the development of Jewish-Muslim dialogue and the involvement of grassroots initiatives, religious institutions, and policy makers in this process.

The main impetus for the transition into the digital space was the Covid-19 global pandemic that began in Europe in early 2020 expediting digitalization of all spheres of social and commercial life. Some interreligious dialogue groups transplanted their encounters to video conferencing services such as Zoom, thus retaining the feeling of a safe space for communal encounters

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while allowing for some translocal participation and cooperation. These meetings were however not recorded and presented on social media and thus not our main focus.

Instead, we spotlighted three initiatives with a strong presence on social media during the pandemic. For the most part, they presented a panel discussion recorded through video conferencing services (or a hybrid of in person and video chatting). These were live streamed and saved on online platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. The privacy and safe space to engage with cultural and religious difference offered in local dialogue formats is replaced by (theoretically) perpetual exposure of the panelists and the few in the audience who ask questions and make comments on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms. In exchange, the outreach of such events is a multifold compared with in-person events reaching thousands of viewers on social media (viewing duration and audience composition is however unknown).

One aspect that all these initiatives share is that they are all supported by public funds. Therefore, the question of their linkage to public policy emphasized at the outset and expounded upon in our first case study is relevant here as well. Another commonality is the presentation of these initiatives as radical and innovative and of those partaking in it as a vanguard or pioneers. In their videos, they call upon the public to emulate their dialogue formats and provide guidelines to that end in publications (de Boor et al. 2020, 101–121).

### 4.2 *Discourses of Adversity*

Two of the main discourses of adversity discussed in the first case study in a general interfaith dialogue setting are also present in direct Jewish-Muslim dialogue presented on social media. The adversity discourses are the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Muslim antisemitism and competitive victimhood. However, once the dialogue supposedly ceases to be a 'trialogue,' the emphasis shifts from the adversity and conflict we observed in our first case study to commonality and harmony. To demonstrate this process, we will draw on different strategies of blurring boundaries surfacing through 'incidents of embarrassment' (Nagel 2019), which threaten the symbolic goal of the Jewish-Muslim dialogue on the publicly exposed stage of social media.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict seemed to lurk beneath the surface of the conversations but was hardly articulated. When it came up it was transformed into potential for commonality. For example, Muslim protagonists implemented a strategy of 'trivialization' in accounts of their travels to Israel. Adversity was introduced into the conversation as warnings from their social surroundings and their own inhibitions against the trip. However, the panelists

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restored harmony by emphasizing how during the visit they discovered many cultural similarities between Israel and their native countries. Further, a Jewish panelist noted that even the Middle East is changing. Now that more Arab countries are making peace with Israel in the so-called Abrahamic Accords, he is hopeful that Berlin's alleged conviviality between Jews and Muslims will prevail in the Middle East, too. He thus made use of the strategy of 'purification' by emphasizing that the conflict between Jews and Muslims was not innate or religious but was rooted in politics.

The connection between criticism of Israeli politics and antisemitism was also a part of the second strand of adversity: *Muslim antisemitism*. However, attempts at harmonization were also salient here. From the start, Muslim antisemitism was not glossed over but specifically addressed. Some of the Muslim speakers selected for the virtual panels were engaged in combating antisemitism in their own communities and related their experience. Fighting antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism was presented as the main goal of Jewish-Muslim dialogue. This goal includes antisemitism among Muslims, anti-Muslim racism among Jews and both in majority society (Christians).

The comparison between the two prejudices was the only issue of contention in an otherwise meticulously staged harmony. It occurred when a Jewish panelist argued that the two prejudices should not be put on equal level, not only because of their theoretical differences, but because many Jews have painfully experienced Muslim antisemitism. The other panelists implemented a strategy of 'polarization' in their reaction to this 'incident of embarrassment.' They emphasized the threat from the far right and the prevalence of antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism in mainstream German society. Further, other expressions of prejudice in German majority society such as sexism and homophobia were also addressed by panelists. This enables the expansion of Jewish-Muslim dialogue to other marginalized communities as a basis for a new dialogue critical of Christian hegemony and open to participants from communities outside the religious sphere, i.e. transcending the 'Abrahamic' or 'world religious.'

The third discourse of adversity is *competitive victimhood*. Jewish-Muslim dialogue is not held in a vacuum. Policy makers and representatives of the (Christian) majority society are involved in setting the agenda and framework of the conversation and occasionally as moderators or panelists. Additionally, the majority society remains the deliberate and maybe even main audience of these conversations addressing questions to the panelists through social media channels. But even without direct intervention, the marginalizing perceptions of the majority society and its media are omnipresent in their shaping of the discourse between Jews and Muslims. In that sense, dialogue is never

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really a dialogue but always a 'trialogue.' Jews and Muslims recount different experiences of Othering in everyday life and through the media and engage in comparison even when not always explicit. Some differences are connected to visibility – religious Muslim women versus Jewish men being the most easily recognizable. Others refer to discrimination history making or rejecting comparisons between past discrimination culminating in the Holocaust and present-day discrimination, as discussed in the discourse of common minority experience in our first case study. To mitigate competitive victimhood a strategy of 'polarization' is implemented. Self-definition vis-à-vis majority society is often portrayed as succumbing to divide and rule politics that are detrimental to both minorities. Instead, they should redefine inclusion and exclusion together through solidarity and closing ranks to achieve the common goal of a pluralistic society in Germany.

### 4.3 *Discourses of Commonality*

In contrast to our first case study, in which interfaith dialogue was heavy on discourses of adversity, discourses of commonality prevailed in direct Jewish-Muslim dialogue. We could distinguish three strands of commonality discourse: common causes, common minority experiences and diversity as a counterpoint to identity. Although the first two are similar in structure to the first case study, they are quite different in content.

*Common causes* remained an important strand in discourses of commonality. However, the focus was less on religious commonalities – unless a Christian moderator was involved in the conversation. The most salient causes were not connected to religious freedom but to increasing visibility and awareness in German society. The conversations were strongly affected by the right-wing, antisemitic and racist attacks that occurred in various German cities in the years 2019 and 2020, as well as the storming of the German parliament building by right-wing radical groups during a demonstration against Covid-19 regulations. Participants often emphasized that the dividing lines in German society were not religious or ethnic (depending how they referred to being Jewish or Muslim) but between those that respect the values of the constitution and those that do not and are therefore a danger to democracy. In accordance, participants called for a shift in the emphasis of Jewish-Muslim dialogue from common grounds to common goals. This means abandoning the emphasis on overlapping commonalities in otherwise distinct identities, because this form of identity discourse dialectically strengthens the consciousness of an unbridgeable 'us' and 'them.' Instead they plead for coalition-building for two main goals: the strengthening of democracy and increasing visibility of diversity.

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Direct Jewish-Muslim dialogue presented on social media platforms also offers a different take on the *common minority experiences* recounted in our first case study. Participants seek to overcome competitive victimhood as well as the overarching narrative of animosity between Jews and Muslims that called for direct conversation between these two groups in the first place. Jews try to counter the narrative of animosity through anecdotes of contemporary solidarity and conviviality in everyday encounters with Muslim neighbors. Muslims on the other hand emphasize the role of the media in shaping the narrative and the self-definition of their own communities in reaction. The participants jointly challenge the construction and separation of minorities, which they feel are imposed upon them by the majority society.

Returning to the strategies of boundary blurring we noticed how the participants adopted a strategy of 'accommodation,' i.e. the development of a *lingua franca* to express a common minority experience. For example, the President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany offered to speak about discrimination on behalf of Muslims expecting an attentive ear from the majority society due to the trauma of the Holocaust. Yet, when Muslim claims of being the new Jews, based on the very same comparison, came up in a conversation they were dismissed as harmful competitive victimhood. This demonstrates that the shared minority (and not interreligious) *lingua franca* is not generally accessible and is prone to accusations of cultural appropriation.

Another example of this *lingua franca* is the satiric and somewhat apologetic attempt to represent Jewishness and especially the stereotype of the wandering Jew as a model of diasporic accommodation for other minorities to emulate. In the words of Daniel Kahn in his song "The Jew in You" about 'universal diaspora' featured in a dialogue video:

> Well, the Jewishness concerning us should not be misconstrued. Blood and land are things with which it doesn't have to do. Religion is a matter most irrelevant here too. So let's try to look at this anew. To find a category underneath the ones we knew. A mercurial identity for people who are strewn in countries far and wide; who haven't got a home and view; who drag around like shackles all the roots from which they grew.[2]

The goal of the common minority language is resistance against the precepts of integration and its constructed ideal of a homogenous German society.

2 „Das Beste Abendmahl. Aus der Bubble in die Charts!" 2 October, 2020. Maxim Gorki Theater YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryoYFoRhLSk.

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Participants in Jewish-Muslim dialogue are making a case for intensifying tolerance of difference in German society. They view diversity not as a source of conflict but as a contribution to the pluralism that is the foundation and, a few of them even argue, the safety net of democracy.

This leads us to third strand of commonality discourse which is *diversity as a counterpoint to identity*. Some panelists express their unease with the dialogue construct, in which they were participating. They are aware of the superdiversity of their own communities which they could never represent in its entirety, as well as of shifts in external attributions of their identity as they move between contexts, e.g. deemed Germans in Turkey or Russians in Israel. In general, they plead for a more liberal approach underscoring the complexity and dynamics of the individual. The construct of a one-dimensional identity is widely questioned and together with the idea of *Leitkultur*, core culture, regarded as a reluctance to accept complex, multi-dimensional identities prevalent in Germany. This is manifested in perceptions of Jews and Muslims as immigrants even if they were born in Germany; in incomprehension that one person could have emotional attachments to more than one country; or in inconceivability that a transgender Muslim does not disparage Islam but rather harbors religious sentiment and supports veiling practices. Dialogue participants perceive themselves as co-creators of a 'postmigrant society' and therefore demand that their perspectives and biographies be recognized within the national narrative.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this article we examined Jewish-Muslim dialogue in two different settings. The first case study focused on encounters that took place in person as a part of a broader interfaith dialogue in the years 2011/12. In the second case study we analyzed encounters framed as Jewish-Muslim featured on social media in the years 2020/21. The focal point of our inquiry were the discourses of adversity and commonality shaping these conversations and the narratives of difference and unity they produce.

There were three major differences in the settings of the case studies: a time gap in which political and social shifts occurred; 'trialogue' versus dialogue framing; ephemerality versus continuous on-line presence of the encounters. While for the most part, the discourses of adversity and commonality were similar in both case studies, we noted both a shift in the characteristics of some of the discourses as well as a shift of emphasis from adversity in the first case study to commonality in the second one. In our perspective, these shifts are

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associated with three broader trends of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, namely popularization, politization, harmonization.

In our understanding, *popularization* refers to the capacity of dialogue events to share experiences of mutual learning with a wider and more diverse audience. Whereas classical dialogue formats are quite hermetic in the sense that they could not reach out beyond their core participants, the increasing mediatization of dialogue bears potential for attracting new audiences. These new dialogue participants are younger and more self-confident in their feelings of belonging to Germany and do not shy away from confrontation with the majority society. In addition, humor is introduced into the dialogue turning the customarily earnest affair into a lively occasion, without diminishing from the perceived gravity of the occasion. On the contrary, it imbues Jewish-Muslim dialogue with potential for far-reaching, utopian political ramifications and relevancy beyond Jewish and Muslim communities.

In our notion, *politization* refers to the capacity and utilization of dialogue events to achieve political aims. These can be generic, e.g. general social cohesion, as well as specific as in bridging an alleged Jewish-Muslim divide in Germany. The national context in Germany has changed dramatically in the time span between our two case studies. The rise of right-wing radicalism as well as recent lethal antisemitic and racist attacks in Germany have become salient in the conversation. The political expediency of Jewish-Muslim dialogue in combating prejudice was underscored not only by the participants but also by federal policymakers encouraging and funding these programs. Since personal encounters on a large scale are almost impossible due to the numerical disparity between Jews and Muslims, let alone between these minorities and majority society, encounters on social media are imbued with an important propagandistic mission.

The main political theme expressed in social media dialogue is increasing the visibility and acceptance of diversity in German society and politics. In that sense, the shift from discourses of adversity to discourses of commonality reflect a shift from reinforcing and blurring identities to seeking common causes for political coalitions along the lines of Foroutan's 'postmigrant alliances' (Foroutan 2018, 23). There is less of a need to negotiate theological and other cultural differences finding its expression in discourses of adversity. However, the corresponding increased emphasis on discourses of commonality is not a recognition of similarities but an expression that differences do not need to be reconciled or smoothened. It is a demonstration of tolerance aimed at the majority society propagating that if Jews and Muslims can put their adversities aside, so could all others.

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Both popularization and politization may translate into a comprehensive *harmonization* of dialogical interaction, i.e. an inclination to *perform* harmonic encounter on a public stage in order to create an image of pluralism and conviviality. Panelists are vetted and selected by the organizers. Unlike in-person events, audience questions presented to the panelists through social media platforms can be filtered. One of the initiatives we examined designed their framework to defuse a potentially explosive conversation by targeting professional groups with other shared interests to talk about. In addition to the staged nature of the dialogues in our second case study, the fact that they were recorded and made accessible to a broader audience might have inhibited free expression and limited the potential to articulate adversity in comparison to the dialogue formats in our first case study, which were more private, open and unexpected.

New forms of Jewish-Muslim dialogue are widely perceived by participants as a joint stance vis-à-vis the majority society and not as a confrontation determined by external political conflicts. Both Jews and Muslims express a feeling of exhaustion from being under constant observation; of their intimate and private spheres being politicized; of everything they do being interpreted as Jewish or Muslim; of being forced to always represent. They express a wish to bond in solidarity and to escape the discourse of victimhood altogether, which they perceive as pitting them against each other. Stripped of seclusion in their intimacy they prefer to accentuate differences on their own terms.

In this regard, Jewish-Muslim dialogue seeks to challenge not only political extremism but the general political discourse in Germany. It is a dialogue within a 'trialogue' striving to change the complete equation by publicly shifting perceptions of the relationship within their shared side of the triangle from a discourse of adversity to a discourse of commonality. It challenges the integration precept's focus on majority-minority relationships in the *Leitkultur* political discourse. Instead, it designates acceptance of democratic values as the main criteria for integration. This redefinition of the foundation of social cohesion would reshuffle the seemingly natural borderline between Germans and migrants marginalizing extremists, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, instead. Further, Jewish-Muslim dialogue is a meta-dialogue as it challenges the dialogue format itself. Participants yearned for the result of dialogue to be the self-abolition of orchestrated encounter. It would become superfluous as an instrument of diversity governance in a tolerant pluralistic Germany.

As desirable as this utopian perspective for natural conviviality beyond the fixed boundary arrangements of interreligious or intercultural dialogue may be, it is doubtful if the venture of abolishing dialogue through dialogue could succeed. Like all other institutions, dialogue initiatives tend to persist. As both

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cases studies show, public funding may create an additional incentive for self-perpetuation and reinforce processes of boundary-drawing and oligarchization. Hence, in our understanding, the reform of interreligious dialogue should not seek to solve all problems of diversity governance in superdiverse societies at once. Instead, it should view Jewish-Muslim dialogue as a laboratory to test new forms and frameworks of dialogical interaction. This may include a more biographical orientation which opens up spaces for narratives of individual self-definition of religiosity, ethnicity and belonging beyond the diplomatic scheme of 'trialogue.' Furthermore, newfound diversification of media and dialogue initiators offers a chance to address and engage a wider audience for interreligious, intercultural and political topics bringing in their specific interests and aesthetic preferences.

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