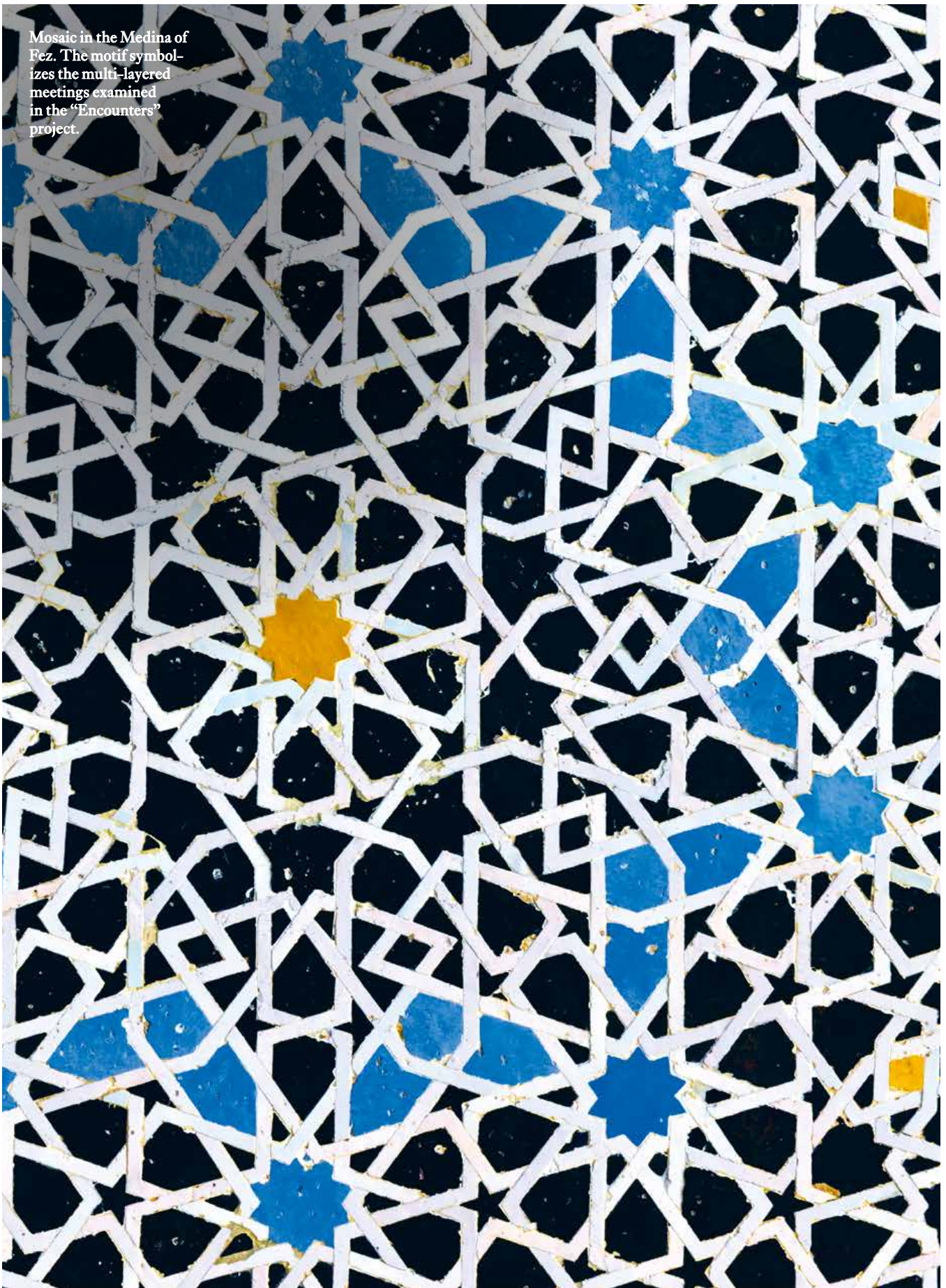


Mosaic in the Medina of Fez. The motif symbolizes the multi-layered meetings examined in the "Encounters" project.



PATTERNS OF ENCOUNTER

TEXT: STEFAN HUNGLINGER

Vanessa Rau and Dekel Peretz, together with researchers working on the international “Encounters” project, have examined encounters between Muslims and Jews in six European cities. One thing they didn’t anticipate at the beginning of the project: the events of October 7, 2023, and their consequences.

Wearing a burgundy sports jacket, Dekel Peretz wanders through the *Maybachufer* market in Berlin’s Neukölln district. The stalls are lined with fragrant mint and thick bunches of dill and parsley, and next to them are watermelons – whole, halved, and quartered. People from many different backgrounds buy and sell here, long-standing Berliners and newcomers alike jostle their way through the stalls alongside tourists, and a rooster crows from the shoulder of a blond woman. “What does a typical Jewish woman look like?” asks the long-bearded Dekel Peretz, observing the crowd, “and what does a typical Muslim man look like? And what’s a typical encounter between a Jew and a Muslim?”

The scientist wants to raise awareness regarding prejudice based on appearance alone, the complex nature of

group identities, and how they are perceived. Over the past four years, co-founders Vanessa Rau and Dekel Peretz, together with 15 other social scientists from Germany, France, and the UK, have taken a detailed look at “Jewish and Muslim Encounters, Diversity & Distance in Urban Europe” as part of the “Encounters” research project. The Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity participated in the project alongside German, French, and British universities. But there’s one thing they didn’t anticipate at the beginning of the “Open Research Area”: the events of October 7, 2023, and their consequences.

When Peretz moved from Israel to Berlin in 2002, he very consciously made his home here, in one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the German capital. “It had to do with my family’s background,” he says. “Some of us are from Eastern Europe, others from Morocco. And it also had to do with the way I look.” He felt that the population in other districts of Berlin was worryingly homogeneous. Even worse, Friedrichshain was going through a surge in neo-Nazi attacks. “In Neukölln and Kreuzberg, I felt safe. I looked like everyone else there.” As it turns out, many Jewish Israelis

and Jewish migrants from the US have ended up joining him, moving to Berlin districts with a strong Muslim presence.

From the weekly *Maybachufer* market, it’s just a few steps across the Kottbusser Bridge to the *Fraenkelufer Synagogue*. Standing beneath the trees along the canal, Dekel Peretz, who completed his doctorate at the University of Potsdam on the Jewish sociologist Franz Oppenheimer, explains that this spot has been shaped by migration from the very beginning, including by Jewish immigrants. “At the beginning of the 20th century, many Jewish workers moved to Berlin from the Russian Empire, and an Orthodox synagogue was built here for them.” After the Holocaust came a wave of immigration by Polish Jews who had been liberated from the concentration camps. Today, this conservative synagogue has once again become a meeting place for the growing number of Jews who move to Berlin from Israel, the USA, and Latin America.

For many years, Dekel Peretz was the Program Director at the *Fraenkelufer Synagogue*: today, he is responsible for the rebuilding of the main synagogue, which was set on fire by the →

55

Nazis in 1938. That means he's not just a researcher; he occupies several roles, which he tries to handle in a transparent and productive manner. British-Palestinian Encounters researcher and anthropologist Alyaa Ebbiary likewise occupies several roles. For 15 years, she was involved in interfaith neighborhood projects and continues to be involved in educational initiatives to this day. Most researchers involved in the project also have personal ties with the research field.

Analyses were carried out by “community media” and social media on all sub-projects of Encounters, and some researchers also used quantitative methods. All researchers, including Dekel Peretz and Alyaa Ebbiary, used the ethnographic method of participant observation. This method is very different from comparative lab analyses, says Ebbiary in an episode of the podcast accompanying the project, initiated and presented by Vanessa Rau, which Dekel Peretz has helped to organize.

56

The observers themselves played a role and elicited reactions that then had to be reflected in the research. Ebbiary is a Muslim and wears a headscarf, which has been read as a marker of be-

longing in Muslim spaces but has sometimes caused unease in Jewish ones. Others in the research group have Christian backgrounds or are secular-Christian – and this does not make them any less “involved.” After all, according to the final report, Jews and Muslims do not come across each other “in a purely bilateral context, but always in relation to a European social ethos that is structured by the power of the secular-Christian majority and the secular-Christian state at both local and national levels.” In France, for example, a strict separation between state and religion is ensured through republican *laïcité*, while in the UK, society is shaped by conservative pluralism, with social cohesion deliberately promoted through political measures.

State and Tradition

These traditions defined how the interfaith activities of state institutions, foundations, and other institutions were structured. “They also helped to open up or close off the possibility for less formal encounters to take place, by establishing the language in which claims can be formulated, conflicts can be articulated, or coalitions can be formed.”

Religious communities in the UK are often actively involved in local activities, while in France they would be perceived as communitarian, i.e., anti-liberal and thus suspicious. In Germany, with its “flawed separation of state and religion,” says Dekel Peretz, political discourse on the concept of the “Judeo-Christian West” and “core cultural values” has long been influential in interfaith dialogue. Also, much has changed in this regard in the meantime.

Vanessa Rau joins them in front of the *Fraenkelufer Synagogue*. The sociologist completed her doctorate at the University of Cambridge, with a thesis on the growing scene of young Jewish Israelis since around 2010 and a new Jewish scene in Berlin. Rau is the co-founder and herself a researcher in the Encounters project. When her British colleagues Ben Gidley and Sami Everett suggested the idea of initiating an international research project on Jewish-Muslim relations, Rau saw this as an important signal. She says that an examination of daily life and real situations in which Muslims and Jews interact in large European cities could contribute to mutual understanding and to breaking down stereotypes. In addition to Berlin, subprojects were also



PHOTO: ALAMY / TRAVELSTOCK44.DE / JUERGEN HELD

The *Maybachufer* market in the Kreuzberg district in Berlin, a meeting place for people from different origins.

carried out in Frankfurt am Main, London, Manchester, Paris, and Strasbourg.

After the Holocaust, says Rau as she walks along the canal, the relationship between German politics and the Central Council of Jews in Germany was shaped for decades by a very clear political stance, which was defined in turn by the wish for reconciliation on the one hand and security on the other. This “negative symbiosis,” a term coined by historian Dan Diner when referring to German-Jewish relations after the Holocaust, at times led to irritation among Muslims. “And this was even more the case with immigrants who initially knew nothing of this ‘symbiosis,’ than it was for people of Muslim background who were raised in Germany.”

In the 1970s and 1980s, a “second generation” of Jewish figures, among them Frankfurt natives like Micha Brumlik and Cilly Kugelmann, had already shaken up the status quo by drawing attention to political structures and antisemitism. But it was only with the influx of newcomers from Israel and other countries that a larger Jewish community developed in Berlin, one whose Jewish practice, self-understanding, and political positioning could diverge significantly from those of the established institutions. At issue were attitudes toward Israel, toward Muslims and anti-Muslim racism, toward sexism, queer concerns, patrilineal Jews – that is, people with a Jewish father – and interfaith marriages. According to Rau, “Where the minority expresses itself in multiple ways, it is more difficult for the dominant culture to exert control over it, and also much more difficult for the state to manipulate.”

In her subproject, Rau examined intimacy in Muslim-Jewish relationships. One strand of her study looked at how encounters between Jews and Muslims unfold on apps designed to facilitate dating and/or casual sexual encounters. Another involved interviewing Muslim-Jewish couples, only some of whom are open about being an interfaith couple. For other couples, their Muslim and Jewish

identities are imposed on them from the outside. Describing one of the results of her research, Rau says: “While public discourse often focuses on ‘cultural differences,’ thereby posing an obstacle for a functional relationship, it is evident that migration regime, social discourse, and structural socio-economic inequalities are factors that have the greatest impact on intimacy.” Romantic relationships face real challenges when one partner’s legal status in Germany is uncertain, when politics fuels racism, and when the gap between rich and poor grows ever wider.



SUMMARY

Muslim-Jewish encounters in European cities tend to be marked by ambivalence, indifference, or a mere “coexistence,” not by harmonious dialogue.

Political traditions, migration regime, and social inequalities shape these relationships much more than religious differences.



Peretz has primarily examined cultural and grassroots initiatives. The “summer of migration” in 2015/2016, as well as the right-wing terrorist attacks in Halle (2019) and Hanau (2020), led to new alliances in many of these groups. In view of the antisemitic and racist violence, these alliances focused on the collective goal of establishing a post-migration, democratic society. When the Covid-19 pandemic forced dialogue formats to shift to virtual settings, it intensified the performative harmony. At Iftar celebrations or other intercultural gatherings, such harmony has also been celebrated in an artistic and culinary fashion, for example, at institutions in Neukölln. So, is it all a matter of Shalom and Salaam?

In the final Encounters project report across all six cities examined, the most common patterns for of Mus-

lim-Jewish encounters are ambivalence, indifference, and avoidance. According to the report, “in neighborhoods where both Jews and Muslims live, relationships are most often marked by a ‘parallel co-existence’ – next to but not with each other.” In places where there is actually some contact, this can mean anything from sociability and solidarity to conflicts and hostility. Peretz says: “It is not scientifically tenable to think that encounters, contact, and dialogue always bring something good, a feel-good story, a happy ending.”

Conflict and Dialogue

The massacre carried out by Hamas in Israel on October 7, 2023, and the war crimes Israel’s government has committed in the Gaza Strip since then, have also transformed the situation in Europe – including in Berlin. In antisemitic incidents, bans on protests, and even physical violence, the political conflict with its Muslim-Jewish connotations has made itself felt here too. Especially here in Neukölln.

57

“Many things have changed since then,” says Rau. “But just like the Covid crisis, October 7th and the Gaza war became a sort of catalyst for conflicts that may already have existed beneath the surface.” Peretz reminds us of the escalation in the Israel-Gaza conflict in May 2021. At the time, the joint open letter initiative (*muslimisch-jüdische Briefaktion*) was launched by Jewish and Muslim organizations, under the title “We will not be divided” (“*Wir lassen uns nicht trennen*”). The aim was to separate everyday local inter-community relations from the events in the Middle East, and to hold demonstrations in which conservative Jews would protest side-by-side with Iranian opposition members, Kurdish groups, and Muslim critics of Islam, to take a position in the conflict. Both were forms of Muslim-Jewish alliances, with very different political agendas.

On a personal level, following the events of October 7th, both researchers →



The *Fraenkelufer Synagoge* in Berlin's Kreuzberg district. It is a meeting place for Jews who move to Berlin from Israel, the USA, and Latin America.

met with a great deal of disappointment across different communities. “From the Jewish perspective, many had expected more support from Muslims,” says Rau. “From the Muslim perspective, it soon felt as if they were all being treated with blanket suspicion.”

Since October 7, “performative disharmony” has been far more present on social media than “performative harmony,” says Peretz. As he explains in his research report: “On the one hand, social media channels exacerbated the narrative of hostility between Muslims and Jews and filled the feeds of users with scenes of violence between these two groups. At the same time, these channels circulated images of solidarity between Muslims and Jews and acts of resistance in Germany, Israel, and Palestine.”

Peretz noted that even non-religious Jews expressed their solidarity with Palestine at demonstrations by wearing a watermelon-patterned kippah. The watermelon is used as a symbol

for Palestine, due to its red, green, white, and black colors. As Rau reports, since October 7, 2023, more and more watermelon emojis have been found on gay and non-gay dating and hookup apps, although this was less a sign of solidarity than an expression of a clear political stance. Rau reports that these symbols created a lot of uncertainty among Israeli Jews, and in some cases led them to ask a question in the chat before a hookup: “Hey, I am Israeli is it ok for you?”

Peretz and Rau consider the macro-political reactions to the events of October 7 as critical. “It is difficult to maintain dialogue when there is mounting criticism and pressure on the dialogue, both within and outside the communities,” says Rau. This also applies to the political appeal of “distance yourselves!” made to Muslim communities after October 7, which took on elements of violence, as people cannot be held accountable for geopolitical events simply because of their faith and background. The unreflective conflation of religious affil-

iation and the Middle East conflict carries great potential to exacerbate tensions and adds to societal polarization, which are dangerous in times like these.

Peretz says: “Since then, I have often been asked if October 7 marks the end of any dialogue between Muslims and Jews. I am of the view that it is precisely times of crisis that make dialogue possible. If there were no gap to overcome, people wouldn’t define this exchange as dialogue.” Sometimes these formats are more visible and public, while at other times, the debate happens behind closed doors. Then again, it is often individuals who facilitate dialogue as “entrepreneurs of encounter.” Dialogue is still taking place, however.

Peretz and Rau both agree that the claim that “the dialogue has failed” is a politically dangerous expression, and that, provided they do not escalate into violence, conflicts are simply a part of genuine encounters and long-lasting dialogue. ←

Medicine of the Future



The exhibition on the cargo ship MS Wissenschaft

Free entry

May to September 2026

Research institutions participating in the project:

 **DFG** Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft

 **Fraunhofer**

HELMHOLTZ

 **Leibniz**
Gemeinschaft

 **MAX PLANCK**
GESELLSCHAFT

HRK

All tour dates:



Initiiert durch:

 **Bundesministerium
für Forschung, Technologie
und Raumfahrt**

● **Wissenschaft
im Dialog**

