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From Lockdown to Warzone: The Digital Turn in Jewish–Muslim Encounters

Introduction

At the outset of this edited volume, Ruth Ellen Gruber introduced "Jewish virtuality" as an "intense, visible, vivid presence in places where few Jews live today". She raised the question of how the concept of "Jewish virtuality", which she coined over 20 years ago, has been affected by the rise of cyberspace virtual worlds and social media.[1] Rapid digitalization, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, has blurred the boundaries between "real" and "virtual", redefining "authentic" human connection. Our roles as not only consumers but also co-creators of social media content adds another layer to the way we view the world – that is, through the lens of social media platforms. These media platforms enable more varied representations of "Jewish virtuality", which reach new audiences. Digital virtual spaces on online communication platforms can bridge physical distances and transcend man-made and natural borders, challenging our concept of presence and sharing space.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world, many countries imposed social distancing measures to prevent the transmission of the disease, resulting in virtual spaces and social media becoming an integral part of the public sphere, commerce, and leisure. In addition, religious organizations were compelled to adopt digital formats for their activities to maintain communal life. Congregations had to redefine the meaning of communal space and address the ensuing theological implications while adapting religious services to the limitations and capabilities of video communication platforms. These internal communal changes were the focus of prior studies examining the digitalization of religion during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the effect of digitalization on interfaith activities has been widely ignored in the research. This chapter examines the consequences and possibilities of the digitalization of interfaith encounters by focusing on frameworks that promote Jewish–Muslim dialogue in Germany.

In the four years since the COVID-19 crisis triggered transformative digitalization, the world has been subjected to several political, economic, environmental, and military crises. The following chapter pays special attention to the role that

1 See Ruth Ellen Gruber's chapter, "Life after Life: Shifting Virtualities (and Realities) 20 Years after *Virtually Jewish*", in this current volume.

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mediatized encounters and virtual spaces play in times of crisis, or rather, of polycrisis – that is, overlapping and interconnected crises.[2] Because this chapter focuses on Muslim–Jewish encounters, it discusses the crises most relevant to this topic beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, namely the Israel-Gaza War of 2021, and the October 7 War, which started in 2023 and is ongoing at the time of writing. The chapter examines how these crises, with their global repercussions, translate to "local" virtual encounters and the mediatization of these encounters vis-à-vis national discourses.

The chapter also considers the intricate connection, made earlier in this book by Diana Pinto, between "Jewish Spaces" and the promotion of liberal democracy, which the extreme right and populism have placed under considerable stress during this polycrisis.[3] Pinto's "Jewish Spaces" and Gruber's "virtual Jewishness" both describe the long-term consequences of the European crises of the 20th century culminating in the Shoah. They depict the spaces of encounter, interaction, appropriation, performance, and contention between Jews and non-Jews trying to bridge the gap left behind by the Shoah. In this spirit, federal, state, and municipal policymakers promote encounters between ethnic and religious groups, especially when their relationship is perceived as inimical, as an important means of dismantling stereotypes and fostering social cohesion. This chapter examines what happens when encounters are transplanted into cyberspace with the explicit mission to expand "Jewish Spaces" into Muslim–Jewish spaces, which, as the chapter will show, are rarely exclusive but rather loaded with hope and meaning for society at large.

After discussing the literature and methodology of the research, the chapter explains the proposed distinction between two forms of interfaith digitalization established during the COVID-19 pandemic: mediatized interfaith encounters broadcast on social media channels, and interfaith dialogues conducted in ephemeral virtual spaces on online communication platforms. The final sections follow this categorization in demonstrating how the digitalization of Jewish–Muslim encounters changed during the October 7 War.

2 Adam Tooze, "Zeitenwende oder Polykrise? Das Modell Deutschland auf dem Prüfstand", *Willy Brandt Lecture* 36 (2022); Scott Janzwood and Thomas Homer-Dixon, "What Is a Global Polycrisis?", *Discussion Paper 2022–4* (2022), https://cascadeinstitute.org/technical-paper/what-is-a-global-polycrisis/.

3 See Diana Pinto's chapter, "Jewish Spaces in a Topsy-Turvy Europe", in this current volume.

Literature, Methodology, and Terminology

The digitalization of religion did not start with the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic forced a radical shift in mindset: "The threat of the 'internet' [. . .] has been transformed into an opportunity, creating a robust sphere of new-media aimed at cultivating religious life and religious 'publics' online".[4] Researchers observing this shift within Jewish communities in real time have focused mainly on the effects of social distancing on the wellbeing of various demographic and socioeconomic groups within the Jewish community,[5] as well as the influence of virtual spaces on Jewish communal frameworks.[6] Interfaith activities – that is, organized meetings held between people who consider themselves to be representatives of two or more religious groups and based on a programmatic approach assuming religious differences[7] – are also an important aspect of communal religious life.

The few studies on interfaith work conducted during the pandemic acknowledge the importance of such activities but seldom present empirical research on their digitalization.[8] The pandemic was a unique global crisis that forced clergy and practitioners of all religions to react simultaneously. There was some direct correspondence between religious leaders in the UK.[9] However, the exchange was not a digital innovation but rather a result of long-lasting associations stemming from an established interfaith landscape. Research on interfaith in Italy has differentiated between some aspects of dialogue requiring physical exchanges

4 Lea Taragin-Zeller and Edward Kessler, "'It's Not Doctrine, This Is Just How It Is Happening!' Religious Creativity in the Time of COVID-19", *Religions* 12 (2021): 747.

5 Graham Wright et al., "Lonely in Lockdown: Predictors of Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties Among Jewish Young Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Contemporary Jewry* 41 (2021); Fides A. del Castillo, Hazel T. Biana, and Jeremiah Joven B. Joaquin, "ChurchInAction: The Role of Religious Interventions in Times of COVID-19", *Journal of Public Health* 42 (2020).

6 Levi Cooper, "Kaddish During COVID: Mourning Rituals During a Pandemic", *Contemporary Jewry* 41 (2021); Sharon Livne and Margalit Bejarano, "'It's Important to Hear a Human Voice,' Jews under COVID-19: An Oral History Project", *Contemporary Jewry* 41 (2021); Laura Yares and Sharon Avni, "'Saturday Night Seder' and the Affordances of Cultural Arts during COVID-19", *Contemporary Jewry* 41 (2021).

7 Alexander-Kenneth Nagel, "Enacting Diversity: Boundary Work and Performative Dynamics in Interreligious Activities", in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion, Vol. 10: Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Giuseppe Giordan and Andrew P. Lynch (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), p. 112; Ruth Tsuria, "The Space Between Us: Considering Online Media for Interreligious Dialogue", *Religion* 50 (2020): 438.

8 E.g., Jeff C. G. Corpuz, "Religions in Action: The Role of Interreligious Dialogue during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Journal of Public Health* 43 (2021).

9 Taragin-Zeller and Kessler, "It's Not Doctrine".

that were more difficult to transfer to the virtual field and encounters that were more amenable to digitalization.[10] The focus on the translatability of physical space into virtual space is intriguing and is extended in this chapter's analysis of virtual spaces on online communication platforms.

Due to the fleeting nature of such encounters, the abovementioned studies are based solely on interviews. In contrast, the research for this chapter also incorporated participant observation, offering further insight into lived experiences of laypeople. During the first few months of the pandemic, I conducted participant observations in two formats of Jewish–Muslim dialogue held in virtual spaces. One of these formats started before the pandemic with in-person meetings, whereas the other started online during the pandemic. I continued my participant observation after the participants transitioned or returned to in-person or hybrid meetings. I also conducted six interviews with four Jewish and two Muslim organizers of these events. This dataset is complemented by participant observations conducted during the first few months of the October 7 War. I attended eight in-person interfaith events initiated by policy makers, three interfaith dialogue events in virtual spaces, and one hybrid film screening in Berlin, which included an online discussion with the filmmakers in Israel and Gaza. Here, I also conducted more participant observations during the in-person encounters that developed out of the initial dialogue in virtual spaces.

The focus on community and the translatability of physical spaces into the virtual world ignores the fact that interfaith dialogue also serves diplomatic goals[11] conveyed through the media. Since the media has been radically transformed by digitalization, the mediatization of interfaith encounters should be explored separately from the virtual spaces that digital technology enables. In digital religion studies, "mediatization highlights how the Internet serves as a media institution informing popular conceptions of religion, thus shaping the religious discourse in the public sphere".[12] Considering the historical and contemporary significance of the figures of the Jew and the Muslim in shaping European conceptions of alterity and shared European identity,[13] the mediatization of Muslim–Jewish dialogue is

10 Andrea Casavecchia, Chiara Carbone, and Alba F. Canta, "Living Interfaith Dialogue during the Lockdown: The Role of Women in the Italian Case", *Religions* 14 (2023).

11 Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue", in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 203–4.

12 Heidi A. Campbell, "Surveying Theoretical Approaches within Digital Religion Studies", *New Media and Society* 19 (2017): 21.

13 James Renton and Ben Gidley, "Introduction: The Shared Story of Europe's Ideas of the Muslim and the Jew – A Diachronic Framework", in *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europa: A Shared Story?*, ed. James Renton and Ben Gidley (London: Palgrave, 2017), pp. 1–21.

entangled with wider discourses on collective identity that go beyond religion: "Media representations and policy debates perpetuate tropes of alterity which revolve in particular around questions of integration, migration and national identity, often pitching 'new' and 'established' minorities against each other".[14] Gidley and Everett demonstrate how these narratives oscillate between roseate historic conviviality and lachrymose interpretations. While the former emphasizes historic conviviality, the latter highlights Muslim antisemitism and Jewish Islamophobia, with the Israel-Palestine conflict looming in the background.[15]

With the Hamas massacre on October 7, 2023, and Israel's bloody retribution, the Israel-Palestine conflict has jumped to the foreground of public discourse around the globe, and narratives of animosity between Jews and Muslims have become prevalent. My research on the mediatization of Muslim–Jewish encounters is based on an analysis of German language formats that have a representative character and are streamed, recorded, and presented on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Spotify, where they are accessible forever, at least theoretically. The research presented in this chapter did not explore comments, hashtags, and talkbacks on social media platforms because the database was relatively limited, at least for the material created during the pandemic. Interviews conducted with Jews and Muslims who were involved in the creation of some of these formats are incorporated into the analysis. By extending my research on virtual spaces and the mediatization of interfaith encounters from the COVID-19 pandemic[16] to the initial phase of the October 7 War, this chapter analyzes the long-term impact of the pandemic induced digital turn on interfaith activities. As discussed earlier, the COVID-19 crisis has converged and overlapped with new crises and conflicts in what Tooze branded as "the polycrisis". According to Tooze, the crises might appear to be separated by space and time, but in their essence, they form a polycrisis of globalization.[17] It is hence not surprising that digital virtual spaces and mediatization that enable geography and physicality to be transcended are concomitant of the polycrisis.

14 Ben Gidley and Samuel Sami Everett, "Introduction", in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion, Vol. 13: Jews and Muslims in Europe: Between Discourse and Experience*, ed. Samuel Sami Everett and Ben Gidley (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022), p. 1.

15 Ibid, pp. 4–6.

16 Alexander-Kenneth Nagel and Dekel Peretz, "Precarious Companionship: Discourses of Adversity and Commonality in Jewish-Muslim Dialogue Initiatives in Germany", in ibid; Dekel Peretz, "The Mediatization of Jewish–Muslim Dialogue in Germany Amid COVID-19", *Contemporary Jewry* 44 (2024). Parts of these publications have been included verbatim in this chapter.

17 Tooze, "Zeitenwende oder Polykrise?", p. 23.

The Mediatization of Interfaith Encounters

Despite social media's reputation for disruption, enabling grassroots discursive interventions through independent content creation, most of the content for the online dialogues observed during the COVID-19 pandemic was created by Jewish, interfaith, and cultural institutions, as well as the Federal Foreign Office. Independent grassroots formats were the exception. Accordingly, the mediatization process during the pandemic did not seem to offer "a profound challenge to the control which religious institutions exercise over the communication of religious symbols in public discourse".[18] A possible reason for the dominance of institutional players is that videos that stand out from the crowd require high-quality camera equipment and editing. However, as demonstrated below, social media platforms and consumption habits had radically changed by the time of the October 7 War, allowing non-institutional players to seriously challenge mainstream institutions and media. Streaming panel discussions via video communication platforms was very common in the initial lockdown phases of the pandemic but decreased in popularity as regulations were relaxed and people began to feel "Zoomed out". Podcasts enabled greater participation compared to video content because they were cheaper to produce. Nonetheless, independent productions were short-lived during the pandemic compared to podcasts that circulated during the October 7 War – many from outside Germany and in English. This might be due to the change of theme, from the realm of religion and Muslim–Jewish dialogue to the realm of politics with a focus on Palestine-Israel. Further, the theme of Jewish–Muslim/Israeli–Palestinian relations then became the epicenter of the crisis.

Rapid digitalization was needed for institutional survival when in-person gatherings were prohibited. Organizations' funding agreements required them to hold a certain number of public events. As the pandemic hit, they could only meet their obligations by adopting online formats. Some organizations attempted to implement planned in-person programming and especially panel discussions with hardly any adaptation to their mediatization. Others saw digitalization as an opportunity to reach out to new audiences and revamp the public's perception of their organization. For example, a Christian-Muslim-Jewish interfaith organization whose public image centered on an older generation of male clergy created

18 Mia Lövheim, "A Voice of Their Own: Young Muslim Women, Blogs, and Religion", in *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives*, ed. Hjarvard Stig and Mia Lövheim (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2012), p. 132.

enduring alternative representations through a podcast featuring young, female representatives of the Abrahamic faiths.

The professed purpose of most of the digital interfaith formats under study was political education and antisemitism prevention. Jewish institutions perceived combating antisemitism, specifically among Muslims, as the primary goal of Jewish–Muslim dialogue. Cultural institutions and student organizations advocated the acceptance of social and cultural diversity, challenging the pressure to integrate into an ostensible majority culture (*Leitkultur*). Social media's main advantage over in-person events is its potential national reach. Furthermore, Jews account for less than 0.2%, and Muslims for approximately 6.5%, of the German population.[19] Encounters outside urban centers, where Jews and Muslims tend to concentrate, are extremely rare, especially considering the minuscule proportion of Jews in the population.

The absence of Jews in post-Shoah Europe was the impetus for Pinto's conceptualization of "Jewish Spaces" as an opportunity for Jews and non-Jews to co-create spaces for the pluralization of society by challenging national narratives. She emphasizes that the Jewish minority experience should be perceived as an asset.[20] The mediatization of Jewish–Muslim encounters as a conversation between minorities further popularizes this asset. It is immensely useful for bringing Jewish and Muslim voices and faces to the German countryside and thus further promoting this democratization process, especially through schoolteachers' integration of such content in educational material. My interlocutors observed that teachers were the main group that approached them on social media to consult on issues pertaining to their respective religions.

Another advantage of mediatization is that it allows for the "personalization of religion" and accentuation of personal experience.[21] One of my interlocutors compared her work in a program bringing Muslim theologians and rabbis together to schools to her interfaith podcast. Both actions are meant to educate people about contemporary religious practices; however, when Jewish and Muslim

19 Sergio DellaPergola and Daniel Staetsky, *Jews in Europe at the Turn of the Millennium: Population Trends and Estimates* (London: Jewish Policy Research Institute (JPR), European Jewish Demography Unit, 2020), p. 31; Katrin Pfündel, Anja Stichs, and Kerstin Tanis, *Muslimisches Leben in Deutschland 2020: Studie im Auftrag der Deutschen Islam Konferenz* (Nürnberg: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF), Forschungszentrum Migration, Integration und Asyl (FZ), 2021). German government censuses do not record religion. Muslims are estimated based on migration from countries whose population is predominantly Muslim. While statistics on community membership serve as a basis for calculations of Jewish populations, estimates vary in accordance with different definitions of who is Jewish.

20 Pinto, "Jewish Spaces", p. 23.

21 Lövheim, "A Voice of Their Own", p. 131.

clerics visit a classroom, the occasion is very official. She is perceived as a representative of her religion, whereas in her podcast, she feels free to speak as an individual. She and her co-podcasters often reiterate in their shows that religions are not monolithic but rather internally diverse, meaning that the hosts express their personal opinions and do not profess to speak for Islam, Judaism, or Christianity as a whole. The podcast is important for her as an alternative to what she considers the mainstream media's othering of Muslims and to social media content created by fundamentalist groups to recruit alienated youth. Based on my conversations with Muslim youths and parents, distrust in mainstream media has become more pronounced since the October 7 War and has been accompanied by a feeling that Muslims are generally suspected of harboring antidemocratic fundamentalist sentiments.

The institutional backing of online formats and their long shelf life led to the careful screening of participants' social media accounts when institutional reputations were on the line. Conservative Jewish institutions venturing into Jewish–Muslim dialogue wanted fresh faces and a feeling of engaging "ordinary people" instead of the usual community representatives in the dialogue. However, they were fearful of what they perceived as skeletons in the closet of Muslim guests, such as support for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel, and ties to Islamic fundamentalist organizations. Institutional representatives were also cognizant that "ordinary people" are more likely than religious officials to say controversial things during a livestream. The goal of their mediatized dialogue formats was to present a harmonic performance of Muslim-Jewish conviviality, not heated debates on conflictual issues. Furthermore, the shift toward recorded dialogue formats severely limited the participation of "ordinary people". Muslim participants who had already agreed to participate in an in-person dialogue voiced fears of repercussions for themselves in their immediate communities or for their families living under dictatorships in countries hostile to Israel.

Cultural institutions also made extensive use of panel discussions, although these were often humorful and entailed pointedly political and social criticism. Occasionally, they created videos of poetic and aesthetic performances incorporating Jewish and Muslim protagonists. Jewish–Muslim dialogue was represented as a coalition built on a shared criticism of integrational pressures in Germany, expressed in the concept of *Leitkultur* (i.e., "core culture"), which limits the space for multidimensional identities. Religion, music, cuisine, and other cultural aspects were presented as extremely hybridized. Power asymmetries between the Christian majority society and Jewish and Muslim minorities were playfully inverted. The coalition of Jews and Muslims (and occasionally other minorities and intersectional allies) aspired to counter the divisive politics of the extreme right.

The right-wing terrorist attacks in Halle (October 2019) and Hanau (February 2020) were fresh in their minds.

The mediatization of interfaith encounter makes it more difficult for Jews and Muslims to have open and sincere conversations. As a result, these productions tend towards *performative harmony*. Considering the centrality of harmony in these mediatized interfaith encounter events, they may lack the prerequisite conditions established by Tsuria to be considered dialogue events: honesty, trust, and openness.[22] They do not "entail the chance of being challenged and the risk of becoming changed".[23] The value of mediatized interfaith encounters is on the symbolic level as *diplomatic interreligious dialogue*,[24] with an increased level of popularization and politicization.[25] Tsuria's conclusion that online discussion forums and user interactions with interfaith media should not be viewed as dialogue but "as part of a discourse, in which power, identity, and the negotiation of norms play a significant role",[26] is true for the content and not just the context of interfaith mediatization.

Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue in Digital Virtual Spaces During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The prior section dealt with the mediatization of interfaith on social media. This section discusses organized dialogue events held in digital virtual spaces – that is, using video communication platforms – that are not recorded and are therefore ephemeral in nature. Setting up a virtual space is relatively simple and inexpensive. Another advantage of these spaces is the possibility of transregional and international participation. This is particularly important because Jewish and Muslim populations in Germany tend to be concentrated in urban centers, and especially in Berlin. Nevertheless, my observation was that Muslim–Jewish dialogue events were more likely to attract transregional participants when the organizers or presenters had existing transregional networks. The question of gender was important for organizers of virtual spaces as well as transregional networks providing support for religious women, who suffer from "double mar-

22 Tsuria, "The Space Between Us", p. 441.

23 Martha Th. Frederiks, "Kenosis as a Model for Interreligious Dialogue", *Missiology: An International Review* 33 (2005): 215.

24 Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue", pp. 203–4.

25 Nagel and Peretz, "Precarious Companionship", pp. 115–16.

26 Tsuria, "The Space Between Us", p. 450.

ginalization": isolation within both their broader religious communities and feminist movements.[27]

Intersectional solidarity was a major motivation for my interlocutors' creation of exclusively bilateral dialogue formats between Jews and Muslims. Interfaith dialogue often focuses on the relationship between Christianity and other religions.[28] My Jewish and Muslim interlocutors were sensitive to the power dynamics (i.e., Christian hegemony) that guided trialogue interfaith meetings, which were mostly initiated by Christians and occurred in Christian spaces for a Christian audience with the topics determined by the Christian hosts. In these forums, my Jewish interlocutors often felt instrumentalized, and their Muslim counterparts attacked. Jewish interlocutors felt uncomfortable with Christians purposefully blurring differences between Judaism and Christianity – in the name of what can be called a *contrived siblinghood* – to "repatriate" Jews in Germany. The opportunity for dialogue is thus undermined by the enforcing of Christian projections, which fails to provide space for Jewish and Muslim Others to reveal their genuine selves.[29] Researchers have used the term "Christonormativity" to describe the invisibility and dominance of Christian privilege in Europe and the United States. Christonormativity describes how Christian traditions and perspectives define the social norms while Othering non-Christian practices. This does not contradict the state's purported advocacy of religious tolerance and diversity. Since the term draws on concepts such as heteronormativity, color-blind racism, and post-feminism, it emphasizes its intersectional implications with other forms of oppression and marginalization.[30]

My interlocutors perceived virtual spaces as an important tool for claiming space by challenging both Christian and male dominance in interfaith dialogue. Digital virtual spaces are supposedly neutral and lack religious symbols, although such symbols may appear in the physical surroundings of participants' private homes, thus shaping the character of the space. Gender could be explicitly thematized and present throughout the event by indicating participants' preferred pronouns alongside their written names. Attire plays an important role in in-person interfaith dialogue. Panelists appear in attire signaling their hierarchical position

27 Casavecchia, Carbone, and Canta, "Living Interfaith Dialogue", p. 3.

28 Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue", p. 202.

29 Ibid, p. 208.

30 Abby L. Ferber, "The Culture of Privilege: Color-Blindness, Postfeminism, and Christonormativity", *Journal of Social Issues* 68 (2012); Armin Langer, "Christonormativity as Religious Neutrality: A Critique of the Concept of State Religious Neutrality in Germany", in *Religious Freedom and the Law: Emerging Contexts for Freedom for and from Religion*, ed. Brett G. Scharffs, Asher Maoz, and Ashley Isaacson Woolley (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 182–95.

and denominational affiliation, thus accentuating differences between participants and religions. Virtual spaces tend to be informal, with participants often joining from the privacy of their homes – especially during the pandemic – without the designations of office, thus creating an atmosphere conducive to the "personalization of religion".

Yet, creating exclusive virtual spaces for bilateral Jewish–Muslim dialogue free from Christian hegemony proved to be difficult. The simultaneous digitalization of religious life during the pandemic created "an immediate religious free market for all".[31] Participants in online dialogue meetings were not required to disclose their religion. For these virtual events, the threshold for non-Jews and non-Muslims to participate was perhaps lower than in the case of in-person events, when these are presented as Jewish–Muslim dialogue events. Interventions by Christian participants added divisive tension. However, the possibility of confrontation in virtual space indicates a willingness among participants to accommodate differences and even hostility. This is a major difference from the tendency of mediatized dialogue frameworks to performative harmony. Digital virtual spaces enable open, uncensored conversation – the prerequisite for trust-building dialogue.

While technology was crucial to transcending spatial distance, the atmosphere in virtual spaces seemed to be an extension of the physical spaces that community leaders had created beforehand and not something newly created by the technology. It is important to note here that in my fieldwork, I did not find ongoing Muslim–Jewish dialogue formats of male-led religious communities during the lockdowns, or in-person dialogues after the lockdown had ended. The digital virtual spaces I visited had mostly Jewish participants, followed by Christians and finally Muslims. According to a Jewish community leader I spoke with, Jews have more experience with dialogue formats due to the roots of interfaith dialogue in the pivotal change in the church's relationship with Judaism and its commitment to dialogue after the Shoah.[32] While Jewish organizations involved in the mediatization of Muslim–Jewish dialogue perceive it as a tool for combating antisemitism among Muslims, individual Jews participating in such dialogues in-person or virtually are sometimes motivated by feelings of guilt or complicity in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Interfaith frameworks allow them to distance themselves from the conflict and send signals of conviviality to a supposed Muslim audience or society at large. Muslim participants had other motives for participation. The same Jewish community leader noted that the Muslim population of Germany is immense,

31 Taragin-Zeller and Kessler, "It's Not Doctrine".

32 Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue", p. 197.

diverse, and, for the most part, less emotionally distressed by the conflict than Jewish participants, at least prior to the October 7 War.

Mediatization of Muslim–Jewish Encounters During the October 7 War

The Hamas massacre on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing bombing and invasion of Gaza by Israeli forces invoked a global state of emergency. This was accompanied by a sharp rise in antisemitic incidents as well as anti-Muslim hate crime in Germany.[33] With tensions rising, Berlin state politicians initially banned pro-Palestinian demonstrations, thus continuing a policy first introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the bout of fighting between Israel and Hamas in May–June of 2021, demonstrations in Berlin were dispersed, and individuals were detained for alleged antisemitic hate speech. However, the official rationale given for the repressive measures was the violation of COVID-19 regulations.[34] This precedent led to broad restriction of pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Berlin in the following years, with antisemitism and glorifications of violence cited as official justification for the restrictions replacing COVID-19 regulations.[35] This demonstrates the interconnection of crises from the perspective of policy-making. Demonstrations also became a major scene for the mediatization of Muslim–Jewish encounters during the October 7 War.

In addition to carceral measures, policy makers employed interfaith dialogue to try to regain control of the situation, or at least signal potency to the public. They secured funds for combating antisemitism and created forums bringing together religious leaders and civil society organizations dealing with deradicalization and democracy education as well as organizations monitoring and combating antisemitism. On the symbolic level, this *diplomatic interreligious dialogue* was

33 Ofek e.V., "Beratung im Krisenmodus: Update zur Beratungsstatistik von OFEK e.V. im 1. Halbjahr nach dem 7. Oktober 2023" (2024), https://ofek-beratung.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/240417-OFEK-sechs-Monate-nach-7-Oktober-%E2%80%93-Auswertung.pdf; CLAIM – Allianz gegen Islam- und Muslimfeindlichkeit, *Zivilgesellschaftliches Lagebild Antimuslimischer Rassismus: Antimuslimische Vorfälle in Deutschland 2023* (Berlin: Teilseiend e.V., 2024), pp. 27–8, https://www.claim-allianz.de/content/uploads/2024/06/20240620_lagebild-amr_2023_claim.pdf?x84807.

34 See https://www.zeit.de/news/2021-05/14/demo-mit-palaestina-flaggen-verstoesse-gegen-corona-auflagen; https://taz.de/Pro-Palaestina-Demos-weltweit/!5772473/.

35 E.g., https://www.hrw.org/de/news/2022/05/25/berlin-verbietet-demonstrationen-zum-nakbatag.

meant to transmit media-effective pictures of local conviviality and interfaith solidarity – especially between Muslims and Jews – to prevent geopolitical conflict spilling into the streets of Berlin. These official pictures were mainly circulated in traditional media. In contrast, on social media, other images circulated that focused on grassroots *dialogue of action* "in the awareness of a shared responsibility: where people suffer, injustice happens, or nature is harmed, religions must take action".[36]

While institutions led the mediatization of Jewish–Muslim dialogue during the COVID-19 pandemic, this role was quickly assumed by grassroots organizations during the October 7 War. This turn was accompanied by a shift from performative harmony to *performative disharmony*. Due to the rushed nature of the mediatization of interfaith dialogue during the pandemic, little consideration was given to the discursive practices of social media – that is, new formats, religious/cultural norms, and the linguistic choices and strategies of these different mediums.[37] Performative harmony was conducive to rebranding the use of the Internet from a threat to an opportunity. The disruptive and polarizing nature of social media was widely ignored. Performative disharmony manifested through images of Muslim-Jewish solidarity in opposition to official German politics, such as the police repression of pro-Palestinian demonstrations, the vilification of symbols of solidarity with Palestine such as the Palestinian *kefiyyeh*, and calls for Germany to suspend military and diplomatic support for Israel's warfare. Jewish-identifying symbols that explicitly proclaim solidarity with Palestine became common at pro-Palestinian demonstrations. These items, including T-shirts, banners, and watermelon *kippot* in the colors of the Palestinian flag, were also, if not predominantly, displayed by Jews who would have not worn *kippot* or identified religiously otherwise in an easily recognizable performance of Jewishness.

The visualization of Jewish presence at demonstrations served to counter the media portrayal of pro-Palestinian demonstrations as per se hostile to Jews and that Muslims and Jews were incapable of occupying the same space making certain neighborhoods no-go areas for Jews. In addition, conversations with my interlocutors revealed that reliance on mainstream media – which young Muslims perceive as criminalizing them – has reached a low point since the outbreak of the October 7 War. In parallel, the presence of Muslim media outlets and Internet influencers has strengthened during the war, and they have integrated further into the media landscape. Anne Sophie Lamine described a similar process in

36 Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue", p. 202.
37 Tsuria, "The Space Between Us", p. 449.

France after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack.[38] Social media made it possible to receive news directly from Gaza and to be exposed to personal stories that gave a face to the rising number of civilian casualties. In this process, Jews started following Muslim influencers who shared their political cause and vice versa. Accounts such as Standing Together that bring together Jewish-Muslim/Israeli-Palestinian perspectives also gained in popularity. Jewish voices critical of Israel's politics were also widely shared – possibly with the hope that the Jewish authorship of social media content will guard the sharer against accusations of antisemitism. While Jewish and Muslim bridgebuilders on domestic issues led the merging of social media bubbles during the pandemic,[39] it was now the Israel-Palestinian conflict that was driving the integration of Jewish and Muslim counter-publics.

The growing emphasis on simple visual iconography that is quickly understood is connected to the rapid technological changes that have occurred since the pandemic and altered social media consumption preferences. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have gained popularity. They enable quick photo and video editing and dissemination of small collections of photos or short videos, making full-length videos widely redundant. The production cost of social media content radically decreased, resulting in activists and influencers crowding out the institutional players who had dominated the scene in the early stages of the pandemic. Pictures and videos of the police detention of Jews, identified as such through *kippot* or slogans, at demonstrations became new icons of Jewish-Muslim solidarity. They aim to demonstrate the paradoxes of Germany's *Staatsräson* – an unfaltering support of the security of Israel as a proxy for all Jews as reparations for German responsibility for the atrocities of the Shoah.[40] Calls on Germany to reconsider its position in light of the growing civilian casualties in Gaza might be expressed by a minority of Jews in Germany. Yet, it is another example of the ongoing diversification and decentralization of Jewish representation, changing attitudes towards Zionism, and the prioritization of coalition-building with other minorities in Germany.[41]

38 Anne Sophie Lamine, "Cultivating a Common World from a Specific Place: The Case of Muslim Internet Media Outlets in France", in *Exploring Islam Beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism*, ed. Christel Gärtner and Heidemarie Winkel (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2021), pp. 252–3.

39 Peretz, "The Mediatization of Jewish-Muslim Dialogue", pp. 312–13.

40 See https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/984870/79547ce7fca4d17deedd8bf400ee7e44/WD-3-134-23-pdf.

41 Dekel Peretz, "Generation Enraged: The Journal Jalta as a Mouthpiece for Young Jews in Germany", *European Judaism* 56 (2023).

In critical interfaith media during the pandemic, coalition-building centered on opposition to German *Leitkultur*. This was replaced during the October 7 War by a scrutiny of German *Staatsräson*. Both terms refer to a supposed shared value system that migrants – and especially Muslim migrants – should adopt. This use of *Leitkultur* gained popularity after the influx of migrants from Syria in 2015. For Bassam Tibi, who coined the term *Leitkultur* in 1996, engaging with antisemitism among migrants, especially in relation to Israel, is an important aspect of the *Leitkultur* debate. However, he lamented the political instrumentalization of the term.[42] The shift towards the term *Staatsräson* foregrounds the relationship between Germany and Israel as focal point of German memory culture as an identity-forming national narrative. While a thorough comparison of the terms is beyond the scope of this chapter, the transition between them in the mediatization of Muslim–Jewish encounters demonstrates an important shift: from the domestic sphere and a mutual stand against the far right and for diversity during the pandemic, to the geopolitical sphere and Germany's foreign policy during the October 7 War.

Another example of the transition from the domestic to the geopolitical can be drawn from a comparison between coalition building during the Israel-Gaza War of 2021 and the October 7 War. In 2021, an online petition with the hashtag "undivided" (#wirlassenunsnichttrennen) was signed by many Jewish, Muslim, and interfaith initiatives.[43] Interest in the petition was so great that the flyer, designed as a single frame on social media, was hardly able to contain the names of all the initiatives and organizations endorsing the petition. Further, the organizers rejected many initiatives from officially joining the petition due to a lack of space on the flyer. At the time, the petition demonstrated a new path for Jewish-Muslim coalition-building by removing agreement on the Israel-Palestinian conflict as a prerequisite. It condemned antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism, while emphasizing that disagreements on geopolitical affairs should be respected and not be allowed to jeopardize domestic alliances. A similar initiative launched shortly after the beginning of the October 7 War was endorsed by far fewer organizations.[44] At this point, geopolitics returned to the foreground. The slogan "undivided" was now used by Jewish initiatives at demonstrations to express international solidarity with Palestine. This reflects broader demographic changes that occurred in cities such as Berlin, where migrants from not only Muslim coun-

42 Bassam Tibi, *Islamische Zuwanderung und Ihre Folgen: Der Neue Antisemitismus, Sicherheit und die "neuen Deutschen"*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2017).

43 See https://ausarten.org/wir-lassen-uns-nicht-trennen/.

44 See https://ausarten.org/we-are-the-next-generation-of-muslims-and-jews-we-are-our-only-hope/.

tries but also other EU countries, North America, and South America expressed their discontent with German national discourse and memory culture, which positions Jews as the main historical and contemporary minority.

Digital Virtual Spaces During the October 7 War

After discussing mediatization during the October 7 War, this section addresses the role of digital virtual spaces in this crisis. Interfaith meetings organized by policymakers were not only media opportunities but also spaces for in-person exchange. There were forums of different sizes and compositions. The smaller, more homogeneous ones primarily brought together practitioners of interfaith, who for the most part already knew one another. This created a safe space for participants to share their feelings since the start of the war, express solidarity or bemoan the polarization and deterioration of such solidarity in everyday life. It also created an opportunity for interfaith practitioners to communicate their needs to policymakers and help sharpen their sensibilities to the emotional complexities of Muslims and Jews in Berlin. A major question on the table was whether Jewish–Muslim dialogue is even possible while the war continues.

Shortly after the beginning of the war, one policymaker brought together a handful of Jewish and Muslim leaders – among them Palestinians and Israelis – from a neighborhood in which many Jews and Muslims live. Participants of the same faith already had standing relationships, but they had no or very little interaction with the participants of the other faith. Hence, it took considerable backchanneling to convince them to meet, with the war raging and the wounds wide open. The meetings were initially held online, partly because of the urgency of action but also because meeting online was a way to overcome participants' reluctance to meet, or to be seen meeting, the supposed enemy. Although the participants expected very little to come out of the online meeting, they commented during the proceedings about the atmosphere being surprisingly open and empathic. They also allowed themselves to show vulnerability. Palestinian and Israeli participants shared their personal losses and worries of further escalation. They realized, through their shared but separate suffering, that they had much more in common than they had expected. Further, the Muslims in the meeting were extremely aggravated and ashamed to hear that Jews were apprehensive about coming to Jewish spaces in the neighborhood because they feared being attacked by Muslims. They suggested organizing public solidarity vigils to assist Jews in reinstating their religious practice in the neighborhood. The Jewish participants acknowledged the frustration of Palestinians that they could not express

their grief in public. Finally, these conversations included a difficult but inspiring search for connection with a divine source in dark times.

The digital virtual space that was created out of the need to bridge distrust and fear of hostility ended up giving the participants hope in an otherwise forlorn global crisis. After a few further meetings in virtual spaces, participants visited one another's religious spaces, which were within a few minutes' walk of each other, for the first time. Their relationships grew, and they jointly organized a public in-person interfaith event, which was attended by many Jews and Muslims in search of hope. For many of the Jewish participants, it was the first timed they attended an interfaith event. In peaceful times, the event would probably have been perceived as mere diplomacy, but now, it provided attendees strength and belief in their newly founded path of joint Jewish-Muslim action.

In another virtual meeting I attended, activists came together to discuss the security needs of Jewish and Muslim communities. Muslim participants felt threatened by the police and hoped to develop new formats for participative security on a grassroots level in conversation with Jews, who are also objects of the securitization discourse, albeit in a different manner. The participants were predominantly women from different parts of Germany. Again, the virtual space provided a unique setting for emotional connection and expressions of vulnerability. Muslim participants shared their disappointment with what they considered to be the state's divisive role in the spillover of the war to Germany's streets and the playing off of Jewish and Muslim minorities against each other. They talked about how their sweet little boys are now perceived as public enemy number one, and how their girls – born and raised in Germany – now feel excluded from German society due to the mainstream media's portrayal of Muslims. They expressed this estrangement by speaking in terms of "us" and "them". Their worries for the safety of their elderly fathers during their mosque visits revealed what statistics of the rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes during the October 7 War later confirmed.[45]

The capacity of virtual spaces to foster hope was underscored in a screening of the video-dance documentary "Chance to Meet". The documentary was completed three months before the October 7 War began. It tells the story of relationships between Gazans and Jewish Israelis that were initiated and deepened during the COVID-19 lockdowns. They established connections through virtual spaces and made TikTok videos together from their separate homes. According to the director, Ohad Nave, once the war started, they realized that their film about meeting in cyberspace could provide a "chance" for others to meet too. Via online com-

45 CLAIM, *Antimuslimischer Rassismus*, pp. 27–8.

munication platforms, film participants from Israel and Gaza were brought into a Berlin loft, where an international crowd of about 50 people, among them many Jewish Israelis, were gathered. At the end of the film, Israeli participants shared their feelings with the filmmakers, thanking them for giving them a glimmer of hope to hold onto in their ocean of despair. One participant shared that the film and virtual encounter was "the most human thing" he had experienced in a long time. The Gazan participant – who, for a time, was imprisoned by Hamas for his relationship with Israelis – said that many people were surprised to see that Israelis and Palestinians could still work together despite the war. He addressed the power hierarchies between Gazans and Israelis in co-creating hybrid projects but emphasized that "we can't start from a perfect place".

The three examples of encounters in virtual spaces during the October 7 War demonstrate the power of such spaces to bridge mistrust. Despite, or perhaps because of, the lack of possibly threatening physical presence, the meetings enabled vulnerability and fostered empathy. Virtual spaces are less prone to visual documentation by the media and are thus resistant to being instrumentalized for representation. Relationships can continue growing into friendships in digital virtual spaces or move into real life meetings and events. Jewish–Muslim/Israeli–Palestinian encounters in virtual spaces were a source of hope and inspiration for the participants. Further, they were an important catalyst for shaking off paralysis and moving to joint action.

Conclusion

This chapter illuminated the transformative impact of digitalization on the Jewish and non-Jewish co-creation of "Jewish Spaces" and "Jewish virtuality", particularly in the context of recent geopolitical crises, which are perceived as an ongoing polycrisis. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a pivotal catalyst for digitalization. It prompted a re-evaluation of physicality and communal spaces, leading to innovative adaptations in religious practices and interfaith engagements. The chapter distinguished between mediatized interfaith encounters that are broadcast on social media and interfaith and intercultural dialogue that occurs in ephemeral virtual spaces on online communication platforms. As the chapter navigated the crises of the past four years, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent October 7 War, it illustrated a shift in the dynamics of Jewish–Muslim interactions.

Mediatized interfaith encounters during the pandemic were led by well-funded institutions. They focused on combating antisemitism and discrimination.

Their permanent nature and possibility for wide dissemination when recorded led to performative harmony being prioritized over genuine dialogue. The main advantage of the mediatization of Muslim–Jewish encounters was the possibility of nationwide outreach, bringing minority positions and especially direct conversation between minorities to places where there are few Jews or Muslims. The effects of this popularization and diversified politization of these new forms of mediatized "Jewish virtuality" were amplified through their integration in educational programs.

The mediatization of encounters changed dramatically during the October 7 War. New social media channels and the focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict enabled grassroots movements to supplant institutional narratives. This corresponded to a shift from a diplomatic dialogue with a domestic focus in support of national cohesion to a dialogue of action focusing on geopolitics in opposition to German foreign policy and the targeting of minorities by law enforcement agencies. Performative disharmony became an important characteristic of the mediatization of Jewish–Muslim encounters. On the one hand, social media channels strengthened discourses of animosity between Muslims and Jews, bringing scenes of violence between these two groups to people's social media feeds. On the other hand, these channels shared portrayals of joint Muslim-Jewish solidarity and resistance in Germany, Israel, and Palestine.

Digital virtual spaces gained popularity during the pandemic as spaces for overcoming isolation and fostering solidarity. They were an important tool for alleviating double marginalization through transregional intersectional networks. Mitigating Christonormativity, power asymmetries, and patriarchal structures was an important goal of the creation of virtual spaces, pursuing the same goals Pinto ascribed to "Jewish Spaces" in upholding liberal democracies. Moreover, the analysis of virtual spaces during the ongoing war elucidates their potential as safe havens for fostering empathy and understanding amid distrust and animosity. Participants reported feelings of vulnerability and hope, revealing the capacity of digital interactions to galvanize community solidarity and mutual support, which are crucial in navigating the complexities of contemporary crises. Both aspects of the digitalization of interfaith encounters – mediatization and dialogue in virtual spaces – present an opportunity to include minorities in redefining collective identities and foster intercultural understanding in an increasingly polarized world, ultimately enriching the fabric of superdiverse societies.

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