

Attitudes of refugees from Syria and Iraq towards integration, identity, Jews and the Shoah

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Summary of main findings:

This report contains the analysis of 16 group interviews with 68 refugees from Syria and Iraq. The interviews with 54 men and 14 women aged between 18 and 52 were conducted in Berlin in December 2016. The contact to the majority of the interviewees was made possible through refugee support workers and volunteers who described the participating refugees as particularly open. The interviewees had come to Germany from mid-2014. In addition to the findings on questions of integration, the focus of this report is on the analysis of anti-Semitic attitudes: What are they like? Where do they come from? Do people with anti-Semitic attitudes reconsider those attitudes on the basis of new experiences?

The interviews revealed a wide range of attitudes towards Jews, from positive or neutral to belief in conspiracy theories and genocidal aspirations. The discrepancy between members of the majority population in the respective country of origin and members of local ethnic and religious minorities was found to be quite significant. In particular, some Kurds showed signs of clearly pro-Jewish and pro-Israel positions, even if some would have to be considered philo-Semitic, in that "the Jews" were admired for their power and cleverness. How widespread anti-Semitism is among refugees from Syria and Iraq in Germany will have to be evaluated in a different and representative study.

Most interviewees were found to have a positive view of the German population and valued the freedom and security enjoyed in Germany. This includes those who spoke about individual acts of discrimination or even violence that they have personally encountered in Germany. From their perspective, the most serious problems included pressing questions like the safety of their families in their home countries, the chances of family reunification, their own undetermined legal status in Germany, the search for apartments and employment, bureaucratic hurdles in the communication with German authorities and learning the German language. The interviewees all spoke out against terrorism and sexual harassment of women, two accusations they are faced with on a regular basis. However, some of the defensive reactions seemed to be fuelled by a belief that these types of incidents were being publicized or were even being made up just to paint a negative picture of refugees, Arabs and Muslims. In other cases, women were blamed for being the cause of their own harassment. When the discussion touched on radical-jihadist organizations like Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaida, these were often described as un-Islamic and sometimes described as being created by the United States or other "dark forces" like Israel.

A world view and an understanding of history based on conspiracy theories could be identified in almost all interviews when it came to a range of topics, in particular in connection with

developments in the Middle East. The belief that the world was under the control of the Jews or Israel was often considered normal or legitimate.

Anti-Semitic thought patterns and stereotypes were very widespread throughout all the interviews, even where the interviewees emphasized their “respect” for Judaism or the importance of the peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Christians and Jews in their home countries. These positions, however, were not expressed as outright hate or violent threats during the interviews. Within their own groups, anti-Semitic statements rarely faced objections from other group members, even when these included justifications for the murder of the Jews of Europe under National Socialism. Some interviewees described widespread sympathy for Hitler and aversion to Jews as being quite common in their home countries. Still, the vast majority condemned Hitler and the mass murder of Jews.

Knowledge of the Shoah was mostly limited to vague ideas about Hitler killing Jews in Germany. The number of Jews murdered was mostly unknown. Some could recall a number of bizarre stories about Hitler, which could be easily linked to conspiracy theories or a “neutral” image of Hitler and the National Socialists, as found in schoolbooks in Syria.

Almost all Arab interviewees considered a fundamentally negative image of Israel to be natural and as a matter of course questioned Israel’s right to exist. This view of Israel as the enemy was sometimes fractured, especially in relation to the crimes of IS and the Syrian regime. Kurdish interviewees often made neutral or even positive comments on Israel, at least in Kurdish-only groups. Many interviewees emphasized the difference between talking about Jews and talking about Israel. But the separation between the two only works partially, especially when coupled with a strong aversion against Israel. Other interviewees explicitly saw no reason to differentiate between Israel and “the Jews”.

Some offered isolated fragments of Islamic hatred of Jews, including accusations like “the Jews” had falsified holy scripture, were enemies of the Muslims or had attempted to murder the prophet Mohammed.

Six factors of influence could be identified:

- Standard and normalized anti-Semitism within the society and social circles of the country of origin;
- Anti-Semitic propaganda in the country of origin, including school education;
- Old and new media to propagate international anti-Semitic stereotypes, like “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and other conspiracy theories;
- “Palestinianism”, an identification with Palestinians that generates immediate hostility towards Israel and Jews;
- Pan-Arabic ideology with Zionist imperialism as its declared enemy;
- Interpretations of Islam, in which Jews are declared Islam’s enemies.

Anti-Semitic ideas only became apparent through the course of a discussion or in relation to specific subjects. They are not usually prevalent in everyday life, partly because interviewees have other problems and concerns. Some showed a willingness to reevaluate the attitudes formed in their home country. This is an opportunity that should be seized upon. A thorough reassessment of attitudes towards anti-Semitic propaganda and conspiracy theories will not only help refugees to better adapt to life in Germany, but may also have positive repercussions in their home countries, where they continue to maintain contact.