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Symbolic boundaries within Jewish-Muslim encounters in Germany

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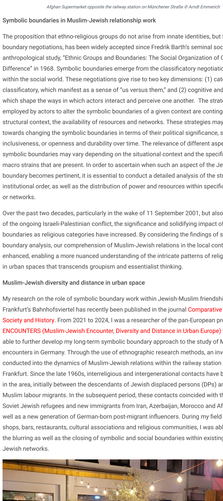
In Frankfurt's diverse railway station district, Arndt Emmerich found that religion is less important than friendship within Muslim-Jewish networks. This blog looks at how a symbolic boundary analysis can help us understand the ways Muslims and Jews live together in cities that are frequently overlooked in macro-level political discourse.

"Those who make such [divisive] politics," says my interlocutor Mustafa, a member of a five-decade-old Jewish-Muslim friendship network, during a lunch meeting in Frankfurt's railway district, "don't know a single Jew. But those who do would never support such politics [of hate], because they see each other as family".

During the course of my ethnographic fieldwork, I observed the use of local references such as "I am a Frankfurter" or "Bahnhofsviertler," a person who lives in the railway station district, as a means of blurring ethnic and religious boundaries and defusing moments of tension, both national and transnational, surrounding Jewish-Muslim issues.

Previous research on everyday Jewish-Muslim neighbourhood relations in France and the UK has highlighted boundary-blurring strategies that emphasise local contexts, such as "On Brick Lane [East London], we do business, not politics", or how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a "taboo subject" within a local Jewish-Muslim company in Paris. During my ethnographic fieldwork in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel (train station district), I also observed that religious differences and faith-based boundaries play a subordinate role in Muslim-Jewish friendship and cooperation networks. The aim of this blog is to present an analysis of symbolic boundaries as a potentially fruitful avenue for enhancing our understanding of the coexistence and distance between Muslims and Jews in urban contexts.



Afghan Supermarket opposite the railway station on Münchener Straße © Arndt Emmerich

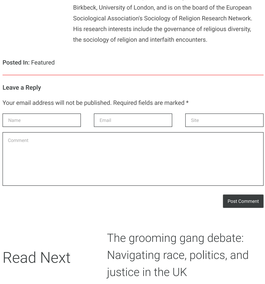
Symbolic boundaries in Muslim-Jewish relationship work

The proposition that ethno-religious groups do not arise from innate identities, but from symbolic boundary negotiations, has been widely accepted since Fredrik Barth's seminal social anthropological study, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference" in 1968. Symbolic boundaries emerge from the classificatory negotiations of actors within the social world. These negotiations give rise to two key dimensions: (1) categorical and classificatory, which manifest as a sense of "us versus them," and (2) cognitive and behavioural, which shape the ways in which actors interact and perceive one another. The strategies employed by actors to alter the symbolic boundaries of a given context are contingent upon the structural context, the availability of resources and networks. These strategies may be directed towards changing the symbolic boundaries in terms of their political significance, social inclusiveness, or openness and durability over time. The relevance of different aspects of symbolic boundaries may vary depending on the situational context and the specific micro or macro strains that are present. In order to ascertain when such an aspect of the Jewish-Muslim boundary becomes pertinent, it is essential to conduct a detailed analysis of the structural and institutional order, as well as the distribution of power and resources within specific social spaces or networks.

Over the past two decades, particularly in the wake of 11 September 2001, but also in the context of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the significance and solidifying impact of symbolic boundaries as religious categories have increased. By considering the findings of symbolic boundary analysis, our comprehension of Muslim-Jewish relations in the local context is enhanced, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the intricate patterns of religious diversity in urban spaces that transcends groupism and essentialist thinking.

Muslim-Jewish diversity and distance in urban space

My research on the role of symbolic boundary work within Jewish-Muslim friendship networks in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel has recently been published in the journal Comparative Studies in Society and History. From 2021 to 2024, I was a researcher of the pan-European project ENCOUNTERS (Muslim-Jewish Encounter, Diversity and Distance in Urban Europe) where I was able to further develop my long-term symbolic boundary approach to the study of Muslim-Jewish encounters in Germany. Through the use of ethnographic research methods, an investigation was conducted into the dynamics of Muslim-Jewish relations within the railway station district of Frankfurt. Since the late 1960s, interreligious and intergenerational contacts have been observed in the area, initially between the descendants of Jewish displaced persons (DPs) and Turkish Muslim labour migrants. In the subsequent period, these contacts coincided with those of post-Soviet Jewish refugees and new immigrants from Iran, Azerbaijan, Morocco and Afghanistan, as well as a new generation of German-born post-migrant influencers. During my field research in shops, bars, restaurants, cultural associations and religious communities, I was able to analyse the blurring as well as the closing of symbolic and social boundaries within existing Muslim-Jewish networks.



Multi-ethnic beer garden in the Bahnhofsviertelstyle – occasionally hosting events with Jewish and Muslim DJs and artists © Arndt Emmerich

Boundary blurring, crossing and closing in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel

Overall, the study was able to show how some Jews and Muslims living and working in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel blur and partially overcome symbolic boundaries by rejecting a singular demarcation determined by religion, and instead emphasising other local principles and plural identities. This blurring of boundaries was achieved by emphasising shared experiences as a minority in post-war Germany, a local sense of community and the creation of multi-ethnic friendship and business networks, but also through discourses of universalism about humanity and notions of religious conviviality in previous centuries. Bahnhofsviertel-based actors also tried to cross Jewish-Muslim boundaries by learning the language, codes, and habits of the other, which was associated with upward mobility, hospitality, and good business practice. One example, a "Yiddish-speaking Muslim" who worked in Jewish shops for many years, shows this could lead to a remarkable degree of boundary crossing and blurring between generations.

An important finding of this research is that Jewish-Muslim boundary work involving historical comparison and empathy in relation to the Holocaust, religious similarities, or shared minority experiences was never confined to the respective urban elites or religious authorities in formal contexts. In fact, local cooperation in marginalised districts such as the Bahnhofsviertel was decades ahead of formal interreligious and intercultural dialogues after 11 September 2001. While religious boundaries have gained importance through national discourses and are understood politically and socially as divisive, especially between Jews and Muslims since the early 2000s and after 7 October 2023, respectively, my analysis of symbolic boundaries in Frankfurt has led to mixed results. First, religion is not always the dominant reference for attributing Jewishness or Muslimness; local characteristics and shared minority experiences are often more important in everyday encounters. Second, religious discourses and practices have – contrary to popular belief – created relatively soft boundaries between the two communities and a form of positively connoted social capital. Third, symbolic boundaries are not solely defined by factors such as class, ethnicity or religion, but also shaped by the duration, negotiation and social age of particular communities in a specific location, which in turn determine the status of individuals as either insiders or outsiders. Drawing on these insights within the literature, I was able to show how established Jewish-Muslim networks and friendship groups occasionally drew bright boundaries to exclude newcomers, thereby questioning the static group categories of "Jewish" and "Muslim" in favour of other boundaries.

At the local level, symbolic boundary negotiations were part of everyday conversations between Jews and Muslims in the Bahnhofsviertel, which manifested itself in language-mixing and exchanges across religious difference. In this context, symbolic boundaries became constitutive factors that were maintained in the Jewish-Muslim friendship networks despite temporal blurring, transgression and questioning. Despite the macro-level polarisation around Jewish-Muslim antagonisms and transnational conflicts, localised views on religion rarely became major sources of conflict in the microcosm of the Bahnhofsviertel, even after 7 October 2023, thanks to decades of situational boundary work.

Indeed, the current crisis has led to a redefinition of symbolic boundaries, reinforcing the importance of established social practices. In a series of statements, Jewish and Muslim shopkeepers, religious leaders and residents paid tribute to all the victims, condemned anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism, and emphasised the local, interfaith character of the Bahnhofsviertel in order to avoid being played off against each other by politicians. Against this backdrop, the rediscovery of intergenerational boundary work between Jews and Muslims is an important contribution and antidote to an otherwise extremely divisive debate.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Religion and Global Society nor the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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About the author

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