

The impact of the conflict in Gaza on antisemitism in Belgium

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ABSTRACT Taking Belgium as a case study, this article aims to assess the impact of a foreign conflict (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Gaza Strip) on intergroup relations in Europe. It asks whether intensification of the conflict in Gaza increases the number of antisemitic incidents in Belgium, and makes use of a database of complaints to the Centrum voor gelijkheid van kansen en voor racismebestrijding (Center of Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism), a federal anti-racism agency, and of an analysis of political claims-making in the written press. It is often stated that the conflict between Palestine and Israel leads to increased levels of antisemitism in Europe but rarely is this based on statistical analysis. The authors of this article undertook such an analysis and concluded that complaints about antisemitism in Belgium indeed showed a statistically significant increase during the Israeli military operation Cast Lead (December 2008–January 2009). Time series and intervention analysis on data spanning a period of one-and-a-half years, however, showed that this effect was not lasting and wore off after a couple of weeks. Apart from the temporary effect of the Gaza war on domestic intergroup relations, there seemed to be no systematic and continuous link between events in the Middle East and acts of antisemitism in Belgium.

KEYWORDS antisemitism, Belgium, Cast Lead, Gaza, globalization, Islamophobia, Muslims, political claims, time series

During the Israeli military operation Cast Lead, which took place in the Gaza Strip from 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009, protest demonstrations were organized in large cities all over the world. At

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demonstrations in Antwerp (31 December 2008) and Brussels (11 January 2009), a number of individuals chanted antisemitic slogans, which were then highlighted by the local media. A public debate followed as to whether there was a link between antisemitism in Europe and the conflict in the Middle East. Some public intellectuals even talked about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict having been imported to Belgium since the Second Intifada. Similar questions have been raised in other European countries, notably in Belgium's neighbours France and the Netherlands;¹ and it has often been suggested that young Arabs or Muslims, identifying with the Palestinian cause, are the main perpetrators of this wave of antisemitic acts.²

Concern about increased antisemitism among the Muslim population in Europe is supported by recent empirical research in the Netherlands, which showed that almost half of the Muslim youth have negative feelings towards Jews (compared to about 14 per cent of Christian youth and 22 per cent of non-religious youth).³ Similar tendencies can be observed in Belgium. In a study we conducted in 2010 among four random samples of individuals of Moroccan, Turkish, Congolese and Belgian backgrounds in Brussels (n = 1508), we observed more negative attitudes towards Jews among self-declared Muslims (n = 791) than among self-declared Christians (n = 330) or atheists (n = 291). The attitude towards Jews was measured using the Bogardus Social Distance Scale,⁴ and an analysis of variance shows a significant effect of religious or philosophical affiliation.⁵ Muslims living in Brussels clearly had more negative feelings towards Jews than did Christians

1 For France, see Michel Wieviorka (ed.), *The Lure of Anti-Semitism: Hatred of Jews in Present-day France*, trans. from the French by Kristin Coupet and Anna Declerck (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2007); and Timothy Peace, 'Un antisémitisme nouveau? The debate about a "new antisemitism" in France', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2009, 103–21. For the Netherlands, see Elise Friedman, *Monitor antisemitische incidenten in Nederland 2008: Met een verslag van de Gazaperiode: 27-12-2008–23-1-2009* (The Hague: Centrum Informatie en Documentatie Israel 2009); and Maykel Verkuyten and Jochem Thijs, 'Religious group relations among Christian, Muslim and nonreligious early adolescents in the Netherlands', *Journal of Early Adolescence*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2010, 27–49.

2 See, for example, Robert B. Smith, 'A globalized conflict: European anti-Jewish violence during the Second Intifada', *Quality and Quantity*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2008, 135–80; and Dina Porat and Roni Stauber, (eds), *Antisemitism Worldwide 2009: General Analysis* (Tel Aviv: Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism, Tel Aviv University 2010).

3 Verkuyten and Thijs, 'Religious group relations among Christian, Muslim and nonreligious early adolescents in the Netherlands'.

4 The Bogardus Social Distance Scale (Emory Bogardus, 'Social distance in the city', *Proceedings and Publications of the American Sociological Society*, vol. 20, 1926, 40–6) is a measure of the willingness to interact with and the attitudes towards, people of different attitudes, cultures and societies. Our study was composed of six questions: How would you feel about having Jewish people as visitors in your country (1), as citizens in your country (2), as co-workers in the same office (3), as neighbours in the same street (4), as close friends (5), as close relatives by marriage (6)?

5 $F_{(1,2)} = 46.443$, $p < 0.001$.

and atheists living in the same city.⁶ Of course, these results do not constitute proof that the Muslim population is responsible for antisemitic acts. Indeed, negative attitudes towards Jews privately held by any one do not automatically lead to antisemitic behaviour or utterances in the public sphere. Our hypothesis, however, is that this would be more likely to happen when tensions in the Middle East intensify.

Has the conflict in the Middle East, through migration and the importance of transnational political identification, spilled over into the European streets and fed antisemitism? According to some commentators, the typical profile of the antisemitic actor in Europe today is no longer likely to be a marginal intolerant member of the dominant ethnic group (like a neo-Nazi or skinhead). It is instead a radicalized member of an ethnic (usually Arab or Asian) minority of the Muslim denomination.⁷ Other commentators have criticized such statements—in which Arabs and Muslims are being pinpointed as the source of a new wave of antisemitism—as being based on poor evidence and, furthermore, as stigmatizing an entire group.⁸ It goes without saying that this is a sensitive research topic, quickly putting those who express themselves on the issue in a rather risky position: depending on the audience, analysts and commentators expose themselves to accusations of being partisan, antisemitic, racist, Islamophobic, alarmist or excessively politically correct.⁹ It does, however, seem to be the case that reported incidents of antisemitism in Western Europe increase during periods of violent confrontations between Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East.¹⁰

The Centrum voor gelijkheid van kansen en voor racismebestrijding (Center of Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism), a federal government agency co-ordinating the Belgian state's anti-racist policies,¹¹ asked us in 2009 to assess the impact of the conflict in Gaza on intercultural relations in Belgium and to investigate whether there had been a rise

6 Muslims (Mean = 4.39, Standard Error = 0.072); Christians (M = 5.12, SE = 0.078); non-religious people (M = 5.40, SE = 0.068).

7 Friedman, *Monitor antisemitische incidenten in Nederland 2008*; Peace, 'Un antisémitisme nouveau?'

8 European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, *Manifestations of Antisemitism in the EU 2002–2003* (Vienna: EUMC 2004).

9 Brian Klug, 'Is Europe a lost cause? The European debate on antisemitism and the Middle East conflict', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 39, no. 1, March 2005, 46–59; Matti Bunzl, 'Between antisemitism and Islamophobia: some thoughts on the new Europe', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2005, 499–508; Robert Fine, 'Fighting with phantoms: a contribution to the debate on antisemitism in Europe', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 43, no. 5, 2009, 459–79.

10 Friedman, *Monitor antisemitische incidenten in Nederland 2008*; Porat and Stauber (eds), *Antisemitism Worldwide 2009*.

11 On its English website (www.diversiteit.be), the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism describes itself as follows: 'The Centre is a public institution that aims to promote equal opportunities and that fights any type of exclusion, restriction or preferential treatment based on legally stipulated criteria' (viewed 23 June 2011).

in antisemitism in Belgium. To this end, we were given access to the agency's database of reported antisemitic acts. This database is the result of attempts to monitor antisemitism in Belgium and is mainly fed by Jewish communal organizations that try to record antisemitic incidents systematically. The database does not really allow us to come to any reliable conclusion as to the identity of the perpetrators—due to incomplete data on culprits—but it does allow us to monitor the antisemitic climate in the country more generally. Combining it with other data, it also enables us to assess to what extent there is a link between the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the level of antisemitism. To this purpose we did a series of statistical tests and performed an intervention analysis on a time series.

We would like to stress from the start that, if a link is shown to exist, it does not shed light on the identity of the perpetrators of these antisemitic acts. They might have been committed by anyone who had been influenced or radicalized by events in Palestine, including those who are neither Arab nor Muslim. Many commentators also point to 'new' forms of antisemitism in (extreme) left-wing and anarchist circles, as opposed to the 'old' antisemitism that was more likely the product of radical Christian-conservative or racist right-wing groups.¹² To what extent anti-Zionism on the 'radical left' has spilled over into antisemitism and to what extent we are confronted with a 'new antisemitism', however, are debates that are beyond the scope of this study.¹³

In the next part of this article we will discuss the monitoring of antisemitism in Belgium and the analysis of political claims-making in the Belgian written press. In the subsequent part we discuss the measurement of the intensity of the conflict in Gaza and the media salience of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And, finally, we examine whether intensification of that conflict led to an increased level of antisemitism in Belgium.

Monitoring antisemitism in Belgium

Belgium has a relatively small Jewish community. There are no official figures but, according to some estimates,¹⁴ about 35,000 Jews live in Belgium. They are concentrated in the cities of Antwerp and Brussels. Jews in Brussels

12 See, for example, Pierre-André Taguieff, *La Nouvelle Judéophobie* (Paris: Mille et une nuits 2002).

13 For these debates, see a number of contributions to this journal: Steven Beller, 'In Zion's hall of mirrors: a comment on *Neuer Antisemitismus?*', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 41, no. 2, May 2007, 223; Paul A. Silverstein, 'The context of antisemitism and Islamophobia in France', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 42, no. 1, February 2008, 1–26; Jonathan Judaken, 'So what's new? Rethinking the "new antisemitism" in a global age', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 42, no. 4–5, September 2008, 533; Fine, 'Fighting with phantoms'; and Peace, '*Un antisémitisme nouveau?*'.

14 Smith, 'A globalized conflict'.

tend to be more liberal or secular, while in Antwerp there is a predominance of Orthodox religious Jews. Chia Longman estimates that there are about 20,000 Antwerp Jews.¹⁵ A large proportion is affiliated with one of the two Orthodox religious congregations Shomre Hadass and Machsike Hadass.¹⁶ The *haredim* (strictly Orthodox) community in Antwerp numbers between 5,000 to 8,000 people. They live in a densely populated and clearly identifiable neighbourhood, often described as a modern shtetl, which is a recognized eruv.¹⁷ Their Orthodox religious practices make them highly visible as potential targets for antisemitism.

The Center for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism provided us with their database of antisemitic incidents and acts of Holocaust denial. It contains a wide variety of such incidents: insults on the street, violence, vandalism, letters and e-mails, and statements on websites and Internet forums. For every incident there is a description, including information as to whether there was police intervention and judicial action had been taken. Here is an example dated 27 April 2009:

Around 16h, while she was walking in the Isabellalei in the vicinity of the Albertstraat in Antwerp, a 75-year-old Jewish woman was confronted with two young men. One of them shouted that she was a 'dirty Jew'. They then ran away. A complaint was filed with the police.¹⁸

This is just one random example of an antisemitic act reported to the Centre. Other reports describe, for example, graves desecrated by graffiti such as swastikas or threats against the Jewish community. A considerable number of the reports of antisemitic utterances occur on the Internet, mainly in blogs. The database also includes more serious violent acts of antisemitism, including attempted arson at synagogues (Molotov cocktails) or beatings of Jews that cause serious injuries.

For the 94-week period from September 2007 to June 2009,¹⁹ we made an inventory of the number of antisemitic incidents known to the Centre on a weekly basis. In total there were 147 reported incidents, amounting to a mean of 1.5 incidents per week. Figure 1 gives an overview of the number of

15 Chia Longman, 'Sacrificing the career or the family? Orthodox Jewish women between secular work and the sacred home', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2009, 223–39.

16 Chia Longman, "'Not us, but you have changed!'" Discourses of difference and belonging among *haredi* women', *Social Compass*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2008, 77–95.

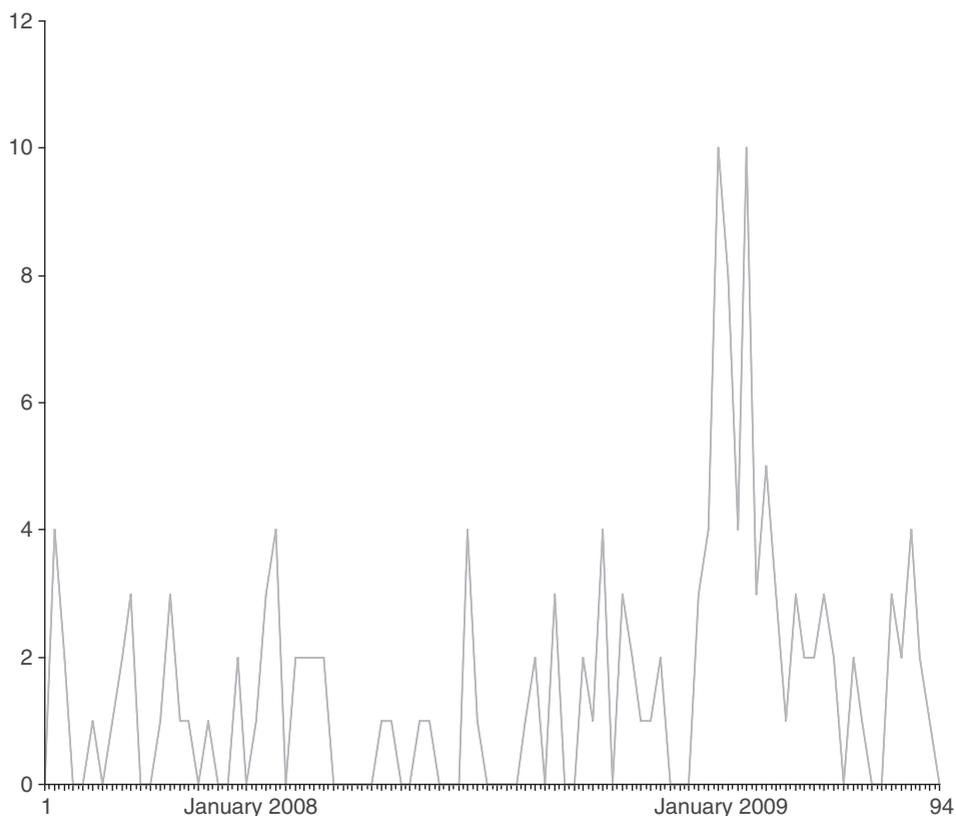
17 An eruv is an urban area enclosed by a boundary that symbolically extends the private domain of Jewish households into public space, permitting activities within it that are normally forbidden in public on the Sabbath. Nowadays an eruv is no longer necessarily defined by a wall but by a wire or a rope, as is the case in Antwerp.

18 All translations into English, unless otherwise stated, are by the authors.

19 This period starts about sixteen months before the beginning of Operation Cast Lead and runs to about six months after its conclusion.

antisemitic incidents per week during the studied period. We can observe peaks of up to 10 incidents per week that coincide with the three-week Israeli military operation Cast Lead (27 December 2008–18 January 2009). During the rest of the period, there are never more than 4 reports of antisemitic incidents per week. Although every act of antisemitism is one too many, a first observation that we can make is that the number of antisemitic acts is limited and that, even during the most problematic period, the absolute number remains relatively low. It would hence be an exaggeration to talk about an extremely high level of antisemitism in Belgium. Without in any way wanting to minimize the problem of antisemitism, one should also keep in mind that the number of Islamophobic and racist incidents is considerably higher.²⁰

Figure 1 Numbered of reported antisemitic incidents in Belgium per week (September 2007–June 2009)



Source: raw data from Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism, manipulated by Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)

20 Centre pour l'Égalité des Chances et la Lutte contre le Racisme, *Rapport annuel 2009 Discrimination & Diversité* (Brussels: CECLR 2010).

That being said, there does seem to be an increase of antisemitic incidents at particular moments and this could be related to external events. In any event, using anecdotal evidence, commentators have interpreted fluctuations in antisemitic incidents in this way, referring, for instance, to the impact of Cast Lead. This article wishes to study the impact of that conflict in Gaza on antisemitism in Belgium in a more systematic way.

We should keep in mind that the database to which we were provided access is composed of complaints reported by organizations or individuals on a voluntary basis, and might be subject to reporting bias. Some antisemitic incidents may have remained unreported while others may have been mistakenly labelled 'antisemitic' without actually having this characteristic. As French sociologist Michel Wieviorka noted when discussing antisemitism in France, the willingness to report incidents may depend on the political context.

Victims may be frightened of making a complaint, or ashamed of the attack to which they have been subjected; institutions do not necessarily record all the acts which should be listed; finally, from one year to the next, the variations might tell us less about the evolution of the phenomenon than about the activity of the police or judiciary, which may itself be subject to stronger or weaker political demands.²¹

Wieviorka also notes that it is not always easy to determine whether a reported incident is really of an antisemitic nature:

The qualification of violence as 'anti-Semitic' may be challenged: it does not follow that, because the victim of an offence or a crime is Jewish, the perpetrator has necessarily acted on grounds of anti-Semitism; it may be nothing more or less than a common law offence, a matter of personal vengeance, a political affair, an accident etc.²²

We should keep these important methodological caveats in mind. Nevertheless the database does arguably allow for a monitoring of the antisemitic climate in Belgium. Indeed, the Belgian Jewish community has a tendency to take all antisemitic incidents quite seriously, and individuals are urged to report them as much as possible. There are undoubtedly more antisemitic acts perpetrated in Belgium than those that are officially known, but one can reasonably assume that the Centre's database gives a valid approximation of the antisemitic climate.

As the total number of antisemitic acts is relatively small, we refrained from distinguishing between different types of acts in the analysis. It should, however, be noted that the gravity of incidents increased during the period of

21 Wieviorka, *The Lure of Anti-Semitism*, 5 (translation edited).

22 *Ibid.*, 5–6 (translation edited).

the military operation Cast Lead. There were, for instance, Molotov cocktails thrown at synagogues in Charleroi, Brussels and Schaerbeek, while such incidents did not occur at any other point within the analysed time frame.

Cross-validation: analysing political claims

As a strategy for achieving cross-validation, we conducted a media content analysis that focused on political claims-making, inspired by the work of Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham.²³ We examined the number of antisemitic political claims in the Belgian written media for the same period that we used to analyse the database of recorded complaints. A political claim is defined as

a unit of strategic action in the public sphere that consists of the purposive and public articulation of political demands, calls to action, proposals, criticisms, or physical attacks, which actually or potentially affect the interests or integrity of the claimants and/or other collective actors.²⁴

Political claims reported in the media reflect the totality of political acts and utterances in the public sphere. We identified those claims negatively targeting the Jewish community in Belgium. Examining the political claims reported in the press allowed us to achieve cross-validation in measuring the antisemitic climate.

It is important to note that the investigated claims are said to be 'political' in so far as they have an ideological function. Political claims can be of a legitimate nature in the context of a democratic state but can also be illegal (forbidden by law), illegitimate or morally reprehensible. It is important to stress that when we use the adjective 'political' in this context, it does not mean that we would in any way consider the claim to be 'democratic' or 'acceptable'. Indeed, antisemitic claims are by definition morally unacceptable and, furthermore, forbidden by Belgian law (as is denying the historical fact of the Holocaust).

In making our inventory, only reports of political claims-making and the accompanying narrative of facts were of interest to us, not the opinion of the journalist(s). Only direct political claims were taken into account, not the projection or attribution of attitudes or opinions. The focus was on the media as channels for information diffusion; what was of interest to us was the political claim not how it was reported by the journalist.

23 Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, 'Political claims analysis: integrating protest event and political discourse approaches', *Mobilization*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1999, 203–91.

24 Ruud Koopmans, Paul Statham, Marco Giugni and Florence Passy, *Contested Citizenship: Immigration and Cultural Diversity in Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 2005), 24.

Although it can be argued that the written press in general strives to give an adequate account of events in the public sphere, we should also here address a number of methodological remarks with regard to the use of press articles as a basis for assessing the prevalence of different types of interventions in the public sphere. We are confronted with potential selection bias and description bias. Selection is an intrinsic journalistic activity. Journalists have to filter information and decide what is newsworthy. They do this both in a conscious and in an unconscious way and, as a result, particular events have a higher or lower probability of appearing in the press. One could say there is an ongoing competition between topics to be highlighted. According to the profile of the readership or the (ideological) identity of the newspaper, a particular topic will be more likely to be picked up in one outlet than in another. José Barranco and Dominique Wisler suggest three strategies to counter the selection bias: 1) use sources other than the media; 2) use different news sources; and 3) assure that any potential bias remains constant over the period under study (that is, stick to media that have not undergone radical changes in editorial policies).²⁵

Description bias is related to the fact that journalists do not just 'report' the facts in an objective manner but actually to a large extent construct the news. Several authors claim that, despite the fact that there are often errors and attempts at manipulation, so-called 'hard news' (with factual accounts of who, when, what and where) is all-in-all a fairly accurate representation of external reality.²⁶ Things are different in the case of so-called 'soft news', when the opinion of the journalists plays a much larger role. In this article we do not focus on 'softer', opinionated news but only on factual news.

We selected three Flemish newspapers and three Francophone newspapers, none of which underwent a major editorial change during the studied period. On the Flemish side, we first of all opted for the popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*. With a circulation of more than one million copies sold per day (on a total of about 6 million Flemish inhabitants), it is a tabloid-like newspaper with a very high penetration rate. We also selected the more highbrow newspapers *De Morgen* and *De Standaard*. *De Morgen*, a more leftist newspaper, daily sells about 275,000 copies. *De Standaard*, a slightly more conservative paper, sells about 360,000 copies on a daily basis. On the Francophone side, we opted for *La Dernière Heure*, *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique*. *La Dernière Heure* is a tabloid-like newspaper with about 560,000 copies sold on a daily basis (on a total of about 4.5 million Francophone Belgians). *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique* are more highbrow papers selling

25 José Barranco and Dominique Wisler, 'Validity and systematicity of newspaper data in event analysis', *European Sociological Review*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1999, 301–22.

26 Jennifer Earl, Andrew Martin, John D. McCarthy and Sarah A. Soule, 'The use of newspaper data in the study of collective action', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2004, 65–80.

respectively 180,000 and 450,000 copies a day. We did some exploratory tests to assess whether other newspapers (like the free newspaper *Metro*) reported on any political claims not covered by these newspapers and found that this was not the case.

As our method for making use of these newspapers, we opted for the 'constructed week' sampling technique.²⁷ This method in practice selects all relevant articles in a particular newspaper published on Monday of week 1, Tuesday of week 2, Wednesday of week 3 and so on until all days of the week have been covered. With a limited number of weeks one can in this way construct a representative sample of the content of a particular newspaper over a longer period.²⁸ Our aim in making use of the 'constructed week' approach was to be able to assess the number of antisemitic claims per week in different sources in a cost-efficient way. As we had six newspapers and six days a week on which each newspaper was published, we decided to change the order for every six-week cycle. We cannot rule out that on particular days certain types of news got more attention than on other days—think, for instance, of sports news that is more important on Mondays—and neither can we rule out that a particular newspaper had a specific editorial style, but, by using this strategy, we could be assured that these potential sources of bias were not combined.

The next step in our 'constructed week' approach was relevance sampling.²⁹ We kept all articles focusing on intercultural contacts and conflicts, paying particular attention to political claims that had any link with either the Jewish or Muslim communities in Belgium. This means that any claim with regard to people (who could be seen to be) of Jewish or Muslim background was retained. These claims, however, had to concern intercultural relations in Belgium. Claims about international politics were not retained unless they were explicitly linked to Belgium.

The relevance sampling was done on the basis of a set of keywords used to search newspaper databases.³⁰ All articles containing the keywords were read, and a decision was made as to whether they would be included in the sample for analysis. Excluded articles might, for instance, have been related to exotic cuisine, fashion or sailing (because of the word *voile*).

27 Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA and London: Sage 2002).

28 Steve Lacy, Kay Robinson and Daniel Riffe, 'Sample size in content analysis of weekly newspapers', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 2, 1995, 336–45.

29 Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 2nd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA and London: Sage 2004).

30 The keywords in French were: juif* juiv* judai* musulman* islam* antisémit* mosquée* synagogue* casher* halal* imam* rabbin* voile* kippa* *sionis* arab* nord-africain* maghreb*. The keywords in Dutch were: jood* jod* judaïsme* islam* Moslim* antisemi* synagoge* moskee* kosher* halal* imam* rabbi* *zionis* hoofd-doek* keppel* arabi* anti-zionis* noord-afrikaan* maghreb*. When one of these words appeared in an article, it was selected.

In a next step all retained articles were analysed in order to make an inventory of political claims. For each claim the following information was coded, in line with the procedure suggested by Ruud Koopmans, Paul Statham, Marco Giugni and Florence Passy.³¹

- the actor making the claim
- the form of the claim
- the addressee of the claim
- the content of the claim
- the target of the claim

In total, 477 political claims were coded for the period from 3 September 2007 to 20 June 2009. The coding was jointly done by three analysts who coded all the claims together. Of the 477 coded claims, (only) 19 were coded as being antisemitic or Holocaust-denying. We coded a claim as antisemitic when Jews or the Jewish community were negatively addressed because of their Jewish identity. Even though it has been argued by Edward Kaplan and Charles Small that anti-Israel sentiments mask underlying antisemitism,³² criticism of the politics of the state of Israel was not coded as antisemitism if it did not contain an explicit stereotype or negative statement on Jews or Jewishness as such.³³ During the same period there were 26 Islamophobic claims, 47 claims denouncing antisemitism or Holocaust denial, 27 claims denouncing Islamophobia and 37 calls for tolerance. Other claims included calls for (or against) cultural or religious rights in Belgium, anti-racist statements and positions for and against multiculturalism. Claims regarding multicultural issues (notably recognition of cultural and religious rights) in Belgium were actually the most frequently observed, and concerned mainly the provision of a reasonable accommodation for Muslims. In Figure 2 we show the number of claims regarding intercultural group relations, excluding claims pertaining to cultural and religious rights.³⁴ The claims can be either negative or positive in content. They always concern the Jewish community, the Muslim community or intercultural relations in Belgium. There are peaks at several moments in time, but let us stress there is also a peak at the moment of the Israeli military operation Cast Lead (weeks 70–73).

As we have already noted, the number of antisemitic or Holocaust-denying political claims reported in the written media was limited (n = 19).

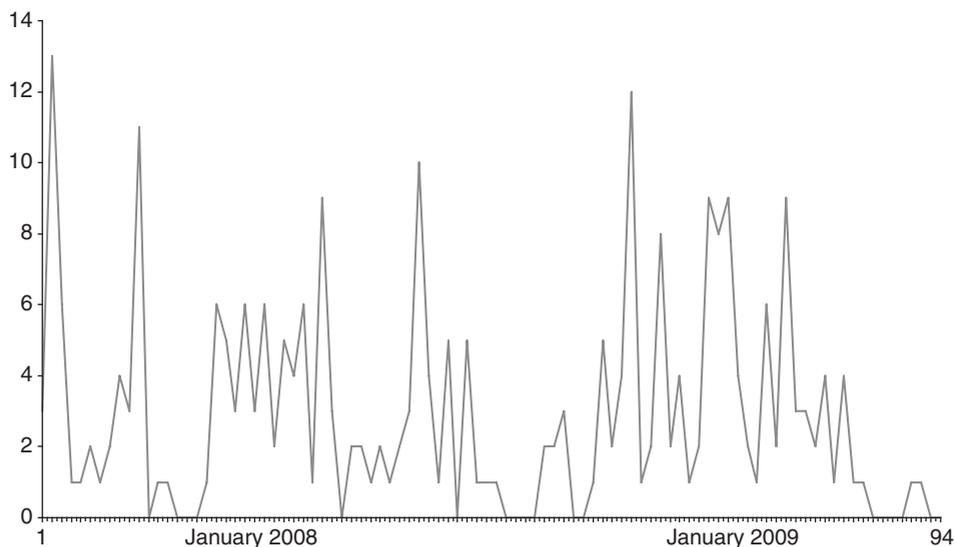
31 Koopmans, Statham, Giugni and Passy, *Contested Citizenship*.

32 Edward H. Kaplan and Charles A. Small, 'Anti-Israel sentiment predicts antisemitism in Europe', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2006, 548–61.

33 For a discussion, see European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, *Manifestations of Antisemitism in the EU 2002–2003*; Klug, 'Is Europe a lost cause?'

34 These concerned, for instance, the wearing of headscarves in public institutions. Claims regarding cultural and religious rights remained relatively constant over the studied period.

Figure 2 Number of claims regarding intercultural group relations per week, excluding those pertaining to cultural and religious rights (September 2007–June 2009)



There were more than twice as many claims denouncing antisemitism or Holocaust denial ($n=47$). As the latter logically are responses to acts of antisemitism, they should also be taken into account. The number of antisemitic claims was, however, clearly lower than what we initially expected.

We now wish to make an initial assessment as to whether there is a link with the Gaza conflict, even though the number of relevant antisemitic claims is small. Let us distinguish three periods within our studied 94-week time frame: 'before Cast Lead' (September 2007 to 26 December 2008); 'during Cast Lead' (27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009); and 'after Cast Lead' (from 19 January 2009 to 20 June 2009). During the first period (lasting about one year and three months), we identified 355 political claims regarding the Jewish and/or Muslim communities in Belgium. During the second period (which lasted three weeks), we observed 40 such political claims. During the third period (of about six months), we counted 82 claims.

Let us now compare the proportion of antisemitic claims during these three periods. In the period leading up to Cast Lead, there were 10 antisemitic claims (2.8 per cent of all claims during that period) and 25 claims denouncing antisemitism (7 per cent). During the three weeks of operation Cast Lead we counted 7 antisemitic claims (7 per cent of all claims during that period) and 5 claims denouncing antisemitism (12.5 per cent). In the third period, we counted 2 antisemitic claims (2.4 per cent of all claims during that period) and 17 claims denouncing antisemitism (20.7 per cent). We can thus say that there was some increase of the number of antisemitic

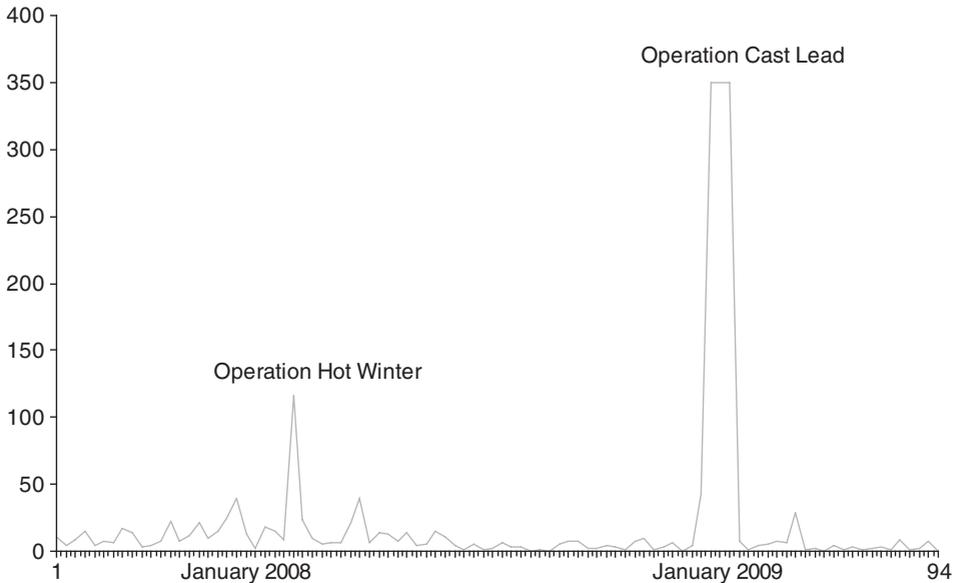
claims in Belgium during the military operation Cast Lead, even though the absolute number remained low.

Measuring the intensity of the conflict in Gaza

Assessing the intensity of the conflict in Gaza is a delicate exercise. On the field, the situation in Gaza is monitored by the independent United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) within the framework of the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL). Among other data, they keep a weekly update of the number of casualties on the Palestine side (both in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank). In the period covered by us, they counted 1,898 victims, with an average of 20 per week.

Figure 3 shows the number of victims on the Palestinian side on a weekly basis (September 2007–June 2009). The peaks that can be observed from the end of December 2008 and the start of January 2009 correspond to the Israeli military operation Cast Lead. The increase at the end of February and the beginning of March 2008 corresponds to the Israeli military operation Hot Winter. It is important to note that the constant figure of 350 victims per week during Operation Cast Lead is actually an estimated average since, during Cast Lead, OCHA only provided a total figure for the entire period.

Figure 3 Number of Palestinian casualties in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank per week (September 2007–June 2009)

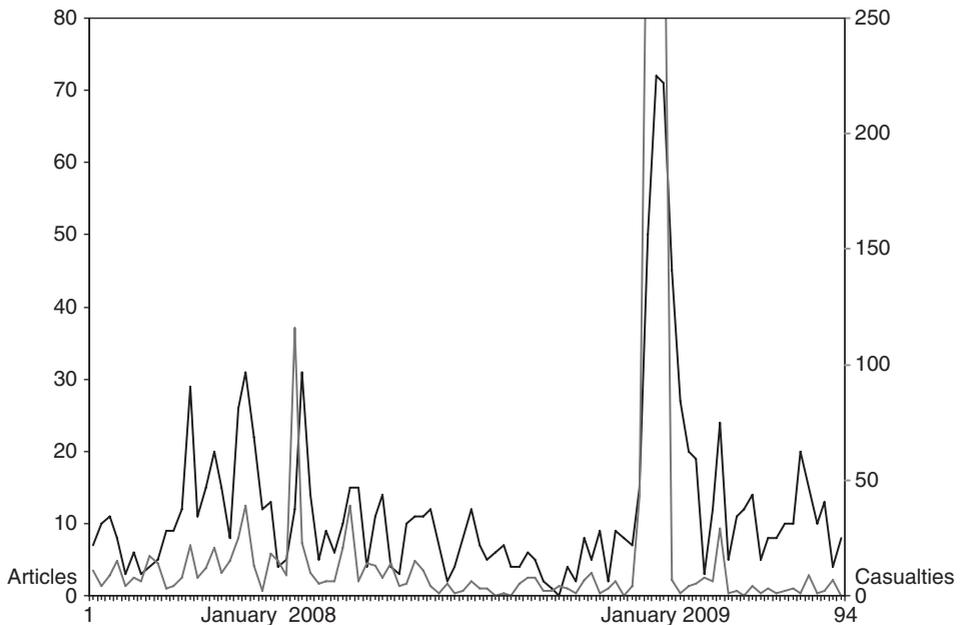


Source: raw date from OCHA, Manipulated by ULB

Clearly this is a very morbid indicator, but it seems to be the one best suited to measure the intensity of the conflict. Other potential indicators (number of Kassam rockets fired at Israel, number of Israeli soldiers killed, number of mobile Israeli check points, number of humanitarian convoys, number of destroyed houses etc.) are missing a sufficient amount of data, are not available on a weekly basis, have only limited variability or have a relatively low frequency. Of course, all human suffering is to be deplored and every violent death is one too many. However, it makes more sense to focus on casualties on the Palestinian side to measure the intensity of the conflict than to focus on casualties on the Israeli side (as on the Israeli side there is little variability and numbers are low).

Although it might be claimed that the Internet, and particularly social media like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, make it possible for some people in Belgium to be immediately informed about changes in the intensity of the conflict in Palestine, this information is, for the bulk of the population, still mainly mediated through the audiovisual or written press. Therefore, we looked at the frequency of press articles referring to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the Belgian Francophone press for the studied period. There is a high correlation between the number of casualties on the Palestinian side

Figure 4 Number of articles on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the Belgian Francophone press (grey line) and number of Palestinian casualties (solid line) per week (September 2007–June 2009)



Note: For the sake of visual comparability, the series indicating Palestinian deaths has been rescaled (right Y-axis).

Source: raw data from newspaper databases and OCHA, manipulated by ULB

and the number of press articles on the Middle East conflict in the Belgian press.³⁵ This is visually represented in Figure 4 which links the weekly number of press articles on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the Belgian press (grey line) to the weekly number of Palestinian casualties (solid line).

The impact of the intensity of the conflict in Gaza on antisemitism and intergroup relations in Belgium

In order to measure the impact of the conflict in Gaza, we first assessed the overall pattern of correlations between the number of Palestinian casualties (as an indicator of the intensity of the conflict in Gaza) on the one hand, and the number of reported antisemitic incidents in Belgium on the other. Figure 5 shows the relationship between the number of reported antisemitic incidents in Belgium (grey line) and the number of Palestinian victims in Gaza and the West Bank (solid line). In order to facilitate a visible representation of the correlation between the two over time, the peaks at the end of February 2008 (166 casualties) and around January 2009 (about 350 casualties each week) are cut off at around the 50 mark on the Y-axis.

We examined whether there was a correlation between the number of registered complaints of antisemitism and the number of Palestinian casualties, during the same week (t) or preceding weeks (t-1, t-2, t-3 etc.). Table 1 shows that there was a statistically significant correlation between the number of complaints of antisemitism and the number of Palestinian casualties occurring in the same week and the four preceding weeks.

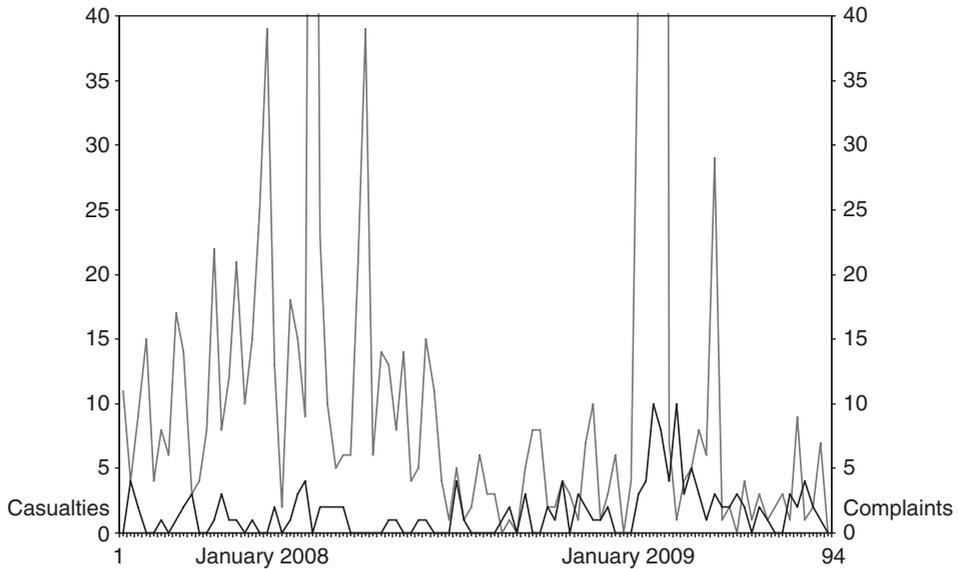
Additional tests—calculating correlations without including the exceptional weeks of Cast Lead—have shown, however, that the correlation was purely the result of the impact of the military operation. There are, in other words, no continuous links between the political situation in the Middle East and the number of reported antisemitic incidents in Belgium. It was only the violence in Gaza that led to the clear increase in antisemitic incidents.

Table 1 Correlations between the number of reported incidents of antisemitism and the number of Palestinian casualties (**p < 0.01)

	Palestinian casualties week t	Palestinian casualties week t-1	Palestinian casualties week t-2	Palestinian casualties week t-3	Palestinian casualties week t-4	Palestinian casualties week t-5
Reports of antisemitism (week t)	0.500**	0.533**	0.555**	0.394**	0.414**	ns

35 r = 0.749, p < 0.01.

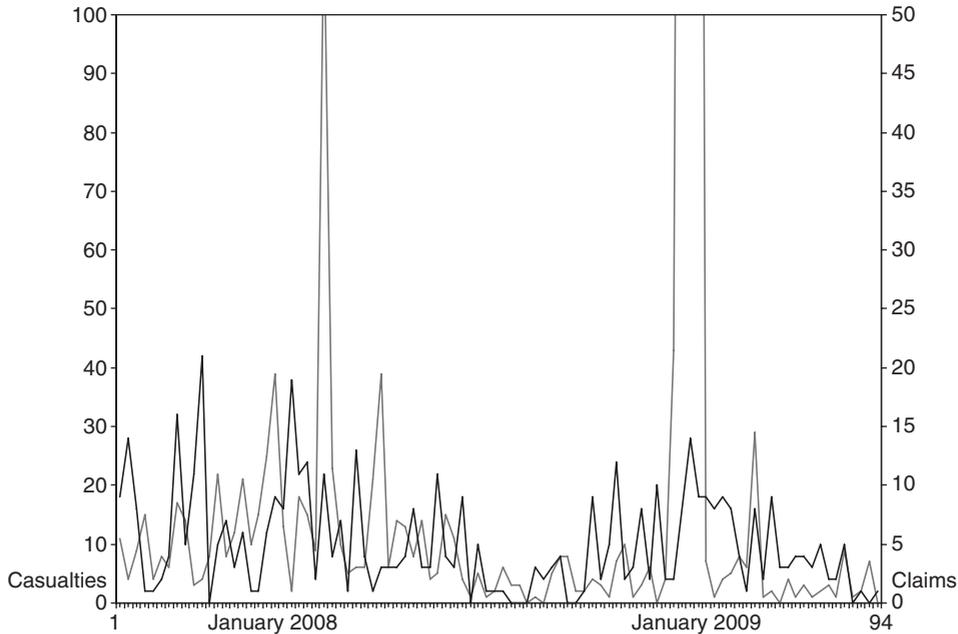
Figure 5 Number of reported incidents of antisemitism in Belgium (grey line) and number of Palestinian casualties (solid line) per week (September 2007–June 2009)



The number of both antisemitic claims and claims denouncing antisemitism in the written media was too small to be able to do a similar correlation analysis, so we had no choice but to focus on all claims relating to intercultural group relations—concerning both Jews and Muslims—in the Belgian press. One might hypothesize that increased tensions in the Middle East would indirectly stimulate both hostile intergroup relations and also calls for intercultural understanding. This reasoning might seem somewhat fanciful but, as can be observed in Figure 6, the number of intercultural claims seems indeed not to fluctuate completely independently of the intensity of the Gaza conflict. This is confirmed by the correlation analysis shown in Table 2. The correlations are weak but statistically significant at the 0.05 level up to three preceding weeks.

The correlational patterns shown in Table 1 and Table 2 need to be supported by evidence that people in Belgium were informed about what was happening in Gaza before we can conclude that there is some kind of causal link. If we consider press articles to be the medium for this information, we should find a link between the number of articles on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and our dependent variables. Table 3 confirms that there is indeed such a link: the more articles that were published on the conflict in the Middle East, the higher was the number of reports of antisemitism *and* the number of claims concerning intercultural group relations in Belgium. The effect is statistically significant for up to four preceding weeks for the report of antisemitism and up to one preceding week for the claims concerning intergroup relations.

Figure 6 Number of Palestinian casualties (solid line) and number of claims relating to intercultural group relations in Belgium (grey line) per week (September 2007–December 2009)



We could halt the analysis here and simply conclude that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict did indeed have some spill-over effect on antisemitism (and on the debate on intercultural group relations) in Belgium, keeping in mind that the overall number of antisemitic incidents nevertheless remained low. We observed in particular that the Israeli military operation Cast Lead had an important effect on the number of reports of antisemitism. In this last section we wish to test to what extent the observed increase is statistically significant, and to what extent it has a lasting effect, by making use of an econometric technique, specifically intervention analysis.³⁶ We used the

Table 2 Correlations between the number of claims relating to intercultural relations in Belgium and the number of Palestinian casualties (*p < 0.05)

	Palestinian casualties week t	Palestinian casualties week t-1	Palestinian casualties week t-2	Palestinian casualties week t-3
Claims concerning intercultural relations (week t)	0.245*	0.235*	0.215*	n/a

36 Guy Mélaré, *Méthodes de prévision à court terme*, 2nd edn (Brussels: Editions de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles 2007).

Table 3 Correlations between the number of articles on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the number of reported incidents of antisemitism and the number of claims concerning intercultural relations in Belgium (**p < 0.01, p < 0.05)

	Articles week t	Articles week t-1	Articles week t-2	Articles week t-3	Articles week t-4	Articles week t-5
Reports of antisemitism (week t)	0.574**	0.581**	0.511**	0.420**	0.317**	ns
Claims on intercultural relations (week t)	0.302**	0.260*	ns			

George Box and Gwilym Jenkins procedure for time series analysis in which an ARIMA-model for the data on antisemitism was subsequently identified, estimated and diagnosed.³⁷ We then undertook an intervention analysis in order to assess whether an exogenous factor had a significant impact on the dynamics of the time series.³⁸ In our case, the exogenous factor was the military operation Cast Lead. We assessed whether the evolution of the time series on antisemitism differed significantly before and after this exogenous event.

As can be observed in Table 4, Operation Cast Lead did indeed have a statistically significant impact on the time series of reported incidents of antisemitism. Figure 6 represents the fluctuations of the impact. As we can observe, the cease fire temporarily diminished the impact on the level of antisemitism but the effect only really wore off from week six onwards. These results also indicate that Operation Cast Lead did not have a lasting influence on the level of antisemitism. The number of reported antisemitic incidents increased during the military operation and the effect lingered on for a week or two but, afterwards, the frequency of complaints of antisemitism fell back to earlier observed levels.

Conclusion and debate

This study aimed to assess the impact of a foreign conflict (the Palestinian-Israeli conflict) on intergroup relations in Europe, more precisely antisemitism in Belgium. It investigated whether intensification of the conflict in Gaza increased the number of antisemitic incidents, making use of a database of complaints to the Center of Equal Opportunities and Opposition Racism, a federal anti-racism agency, as well as a database of political claims in the

37 George Box and Gwilym Jenkins (eds), *Time Series Analysis: Forecasting and Control* (San Francisco: Holden-Day 1976).

38 Barbara G. Tabachnick and Linda S. Fidell, *Using Multivariate Statistics*, 5th edn (Boston: Allyn and Bacon 2007).

Table 4 Parameters of the intervention analysis for antisemitism

	Parameter estimate	SE	t	
Constant	1.142***	0.144	7.939	
Week one	2.646*	1.287	2.056	start of Operation Cast Lead
Week two	8.913***	1.283	6.949	
Week three	6.871***	1.268	5.419	end of Operation Cast Lead
Week four	2.857*	1.267	2.255	
Week five	8.857***	1.267	6.9	
Week six	n/a			

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

written press. Complaints of antisemitism indeed showed a statistically significant increase during the Israeli military operation Cast Lead (December 2008–January 2009). Time series and intervention analysis, however, showed that this effect was not lasting and wore off after a couple of weeks. Furthermore, apart from the temporary effect of the Gaza war on domestic intergroup relations, there seemed to be no systematic and continuous link between events in the Middle East and acts of antisemitism in Belgium. Without wanting to minimize the problem of antisemitism, we have to conclude that the most alarmist interpretations and hypotheses about a lasting (and increasing) negative impact of the conflict in the Middle East on antisemitism in Belgium are exaggerated. We hope this analysis has demonstrated the added value of a non-partisan and methods-based analysis of the potential impact of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the level of antisemitism in Belgium, and might inspire similar efforts in other countries in Europe. We do not claim to have been able to develop a perfect research design for evaluating the impact of the intensity of the conflict in the Middle East on the level of antisemitism in Europe—we, for instance, only focused on public statements and reported incidents and not on attitudes—but we do believe our emphasis on methodological considerations is a step forward in the debate on the rise of a (new) antisemitism. The societal and political stakes are too high to settle for more impressionistic and methodologically weaker assessments.

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