

EXODUS Blogpost #2

Antisemitic crimes in Greece: From the internet to targeted attacks

Antisemitism in the 21st century does not only manifest through swastikas and street attacks. It operates through sarcastic memes, emojis, slogans, and hashtags in posts rooted in deep-seated stereotypes. Digital antisemitism is not innocent. It fosters a climate of tolerance, normalises hatred, and in some cases, paves the way for physical acts of violence or targeting.

To address this form of hate, the EXODUS project seeks to strengthen the rule of law's ability to respond effectively. By studying the transition from speech to crime, both online and in the physical world, the project designs identification models, interventions, and investigative procedures and applies them in practice by training frontline professionals.

From stereotype to incident: A typology of antisemitic crimes


An analysis of the Greek context reveals that antisemitic crimes take diverse forms, frequencies, and intensities. These range from verbal threats to vandalism and targeted attacks on symbols of Jewish presence.

The typology developed includes four main categories: verbal and written attacks (such as threatening slogans), desecration of Jewish sites and monuments, online hate speech using symbols, memes, and conspiracy theories, and—more rarely—physical attacks on individuals. As noted in EXODUS project's analysis, the aim of such crimes is not only to offend but also to collectively intimidate a religious and historically targeted community.

As Dr. Eleftheriou, Director of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki (2019), points out, the absence of Jewish presence in public discourse facilitates the reproduction of imaginary depictions of the Jew as the “other”—a figure blamed for every crisis, from the economy to the pandemic. Although each category varies in frequency and intensity, the overall picture shows that antisemitism remains active and adaptable, shifting between physical and digital environments and exploiting contemporary forms of cultural expression.

The new language of hate: Image, irony, and code

Today, antisemitism is not only expressed through slurs but also through emojis, music videos, memes with ironic captions, and seemingly “funny” hashtags. This form of speech combines images, sounds, words, and context to create cultural codes that work through insinuation. A characteristic example is a meme depicting the “Happy Merchant”—a caricature with a hooked nose and a sarcastic grin. The meme is paired with money emojis or captions about the “global elite,” triggering a range of stereotypical interpretations. Thus, there is no need to explicitly write “the Jews are to blame” because the message is conveyed implicitly.



This happens due to a mechanism known as cognitive anchoring - a psychological process where the brain interprets new information based on pre-existing biases. Viewers of the meme have already encountered similar images and have “learned” - consciously or not - what they signify. As Scheiber (2024) shows, the meme activates these pre-formed mental patterns without needing further explanation.

At the same time, this rhetoric appears as humor or irony, making it harder to identify and socially more acceptable. The Decoding Antisemitism project explains how this banalization discourse works: antisemitic speech doesn’t appear aggressive but rather normal, harmless, or “funny,” which is precisely what makes it more dangerous (Gunkel et al., 2022).

In the same vein, Dr. Eleftheriou (2019) observes that this ironic tone dulls the seriousness of the rhetoric, creating an environment where “hate is disguised as humor.” Users can claim “I’m joking,” yet the message is still conveyed and embedded in collective culture. When it reappears, the audience is already familiar with hate, without ever being asked to agree with it.

When what’s on screen becomes reality

The critical question is whether online rhetoric can lead to real-world violence. Research from the EXODUS project [1] documents both the widespread circulation of antisemitic rhetoric online and the systematic targeting of Jewish monuments and symbols. Dr. Eleftheriou (2019) further emphasizes that online antisemitic rhetoric in Greece is linked to a reality of targeting - such as synagogue arson, desecration of monuments, and insults against individuals.

However, Gunkel et al. (2022) and Zhou et al. (2023) highlight another important dimension: what is internationally called derivative hate - a phenomenon where exposure to repeated hate speech patterns doesn’t immediately lead to crime but cultivates a climate of tolerance, devaluation, and desensitization toward the targeted population.

Scheiber (2024) analyzes how memes function as agents of normalization, allowing viewers to laugh or emotionally distance themselves from the message without rejecting it. Through cognitive anchoring, the antisemitic image is imprinted in the mind not as hate, but as “joke,” “comment,” or “counterpoint.” This seemingly harmless content acts as a foundation for the later acceptance or tolerance of acts of violence or exclusion.

In other words, this rhetoric of familiarization doesn’t necessarily persuade someone to attack, but it does persuade them that it’s not worth reacting when someone else does.

How can we respond?

The analysis of contemporary antisemitic discourse online - in memes, comments, hashtags, or “humorous” videos - reveals that the issue lies not only in the content itself but in how it becomes normalized, ambiguous, and ultimately tolerated. Familiarization rhetoric and cognitive anchoring create a mild but persistent normalization of hate, which can lay the groundwork for social devaluation or tolerance of more extreme actions.

However, action is also needed beyond the online realm, where antisemitic crimes take the form of vandalism, threats, or personal attacks. There must be a comprehensive strengthening of the capacity of relevant actors to recognize, document, and investigate these incidents in accordance with the principles of the rule of law and victim protection.

This is precisely the need addressed by the EXODUS project, in which the Center for Security Studies (KEMEA) participates. The forthcoming White Paper on Antisemitic Crimes will offer practical tools for detecting and recognizing hate speech, both online and in physical spaces. This material will form the basis for the training of 1,000 frontline professionals -including police officers, crime investigators, prosecutors, and judicial officials- aimed at creating a unified framework for prevention, intervention, and criminal investigation.

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