**This publication is based on the following edited volume**
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## SYNOPSIS

# Islamism as a Societal Challenge

### Causes, Consequences, Strategic Responses

RADIS

## Imprint

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# Preface

This publication contains short versions of the contributions to the edited volume „Islamism as a Societal Challenge: Causes, Consequences, and Strategic Responses“, published with Springer VS by Shaimaa Abdellah, Sina Tultschinetski, Julian Junk, and Manuela Freiheit. The short versions include, with the authors‘ permission, excerpts from the original contributions, partly verbatim and partly with minor editorial changes.

The volume brings together findings of the RADIS research network. Over four years the network conducted interdisciplinary research on questions relating to the causes and effects of Islamism in Germany and Europe. Further information on the research network and the participating projects can be found on **the RADIS website,** alongside an extensive list of publications, video materials, podcasts, and a blog series on key research topics. The website offers practice-oriented resources and transfer publications aimed especially at stakeholders from politics, the education sector, and civil society.

We would like to thank all authors whose contributions have made this volume a multifaceted and insightful work, as well as the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR) for its generous funding of the research network.

## Note

This text has been translated into English by Sina Tultschinetski & Shaimaa Abdellah and edited by Sam Forsythe. AI such as ChatGPT and DeepL was used in the early stages of the translation process to help with the initial drafting and the correct use of specialised terminology. The final text is our own and has undergone scrutinous language editing. Minor deviations from the original text may occur for stylistic reasons and to improve comprehension.

# Content

# Chapter 1: Islamism as a Societal Challenge: An Introduction

*Shaimaa Abdellah, Manuela Freiheit, Julian Junk and Sina Tultschinetski (RADIS)*

## 1. Polarised society and significance of the phenomenon

Ever since the attacks of September 11, 2001, there have been recurring debates about the causes and effects of Islamist activities in Germany (cf. Brost et al. 2022; Damir-Geilsdorf 2023). The consequences for security policy have been the tightening of security legislation, expansion of the powers of security authorities, and the review of existing prevention measures. On the social policy side, debates on Islamism were conflated with issues of immigration and integration, or triggered discussions about the acceptance of Islam in Germany.

These complex societal reactions remain understudied, even though they are highly relevant. They affect both security and the perception of security and can also reinforce polarisation and stigmatisation – both of which are potential catalysts for radicalisation. The debate on Islamism is therefore not a fringe issue, but a core challenge for a liberal society and representative democracy. Research on Islamism and how to address it has grown significantly over the past decade, but the societal dimension still receives too little attention.

The edited volume *Islamismus als gesellschaftliche Herausforderung: Ursachen, Wirkungen, Handlungsoptionen* (*Islamism as a Societal Challenge: Causes, Consequences, Strategic Responses*) fills this gap by bringing together various analytical and disciplinary perspectives from numerous strands of research. The 12 chapters synthesise the findings of a network of over 100 scholars working on 12 different projects. Over the past four years they have researched radicalisation, societal polarisation, and response strategies in politics, administration, civil society, and security agencies. These research projects were funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR) from 2020 to 2025, as part of the funding programme “Societal Causes and Effects of Radical Islam in Germany and Europe”.

All contributions in this volume deal with the phenomenon of Islamism. Islamism is a controversial concept that is evolving in response to societal change. The different chapters of this volume present five interrelated perspectives that illustrate the many ways in which the phenomenon of Islamism can be approached:

(1) Public security and social stability: Islamism can pose an immediate threat not only through terrorist attacks, but also by undermining social stability. Radicalisation processes, polarisation, and extremist ideologies can have a destabilising effect.

(2) Interactions with societal dynamics: Islamism is closely linked to racism, discrimination, social exclusion, and identity conflicts. These dynamics reinforce each other and lead to tensions that extend beyond Muslim communities. Such tensions form the backdrop for socio-political debates that are increasingly focusing on Muslim communities. For example, regarding the integration of Islam into German society or the role and responsibilities of Muslim communities.

(3) Prevention and policy measures: A fundamental understanding of the causes of Islamism and its interactions with discrimination and other forms of extremism, such as right-wing extremism, is essential for developing effective prevention measures. These range from social integration and civic education to government programmes designed to identify harmful radicalisation phenomena at an early stage and counter them.

(4) Fostering social cohesion: Islamism can exacerbate and intensify existing social challenges such as racism, discrimination, and antisemitism. A differentiated analysis of the phenomenon is therefore essential, not only to tackle its consequences effectively, but also to strengthen tolerance, dialogue, and social resilience in an increasingly polarised world.

(5) Transnational and international dimension: Islamist networks are transnational, while counterstrategies remain local or national. Better international coordination can help understand Islamist networks, prevent radicalisation, and maintain a strong democratic foundation. Islamism is much more than a security problem – the phenomenon is deeply rooted in social, cultural, and political processes. These diverse conceptual approaches are reflected in this volume.

## 2. Conceptual diversity, intersections, and areas of conflict in the field of Islamism

Concepts used in the context of Islamism, radicalisation, and extremism are the subject of academic and societal debate. This diversity is both necessary and valuable, yet it also presents challenges.

One example is the term *radical Islam*, which is used in the title of the funding programme, "Social causes and effects of radical Islam in Germany and Europe". The term is used to describe phenomena associated with extremist ideologies or violence, suggesting a clearly defined, homogeneous strand within Islam. In doing so, the diversity of this religion, with its different beliefs, practices, and cultural influences, is often overlooked. In addition, the term conflates religious content with political ideologies by grouping violent organisations such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) with conservative but non-violent movements. This carries the risk of generalising and stigmatising Muslims or people perceived as Muslims (e.g. Hößl et al. 2020, p. 13).

Another problem lies in equating *radical* with *extremist* or *violent*. What a society considers radical or extremist can change over time and is assessed differently from different perspectives. Terms such as *extremist* are also heavily influenced by security authorities and associated with a classification as anti-constitutional. Furthermore, the boundaries between radicalism and extremism are defined differently, and there is no academic consensus as to whether a radical or extremist attitude inevitably implies a propensity to violence (e.g. Neumann et al. 2018; Daase et al. 2019; Abay Gaspar 2020).

In its original sense, being *radical* means addressing societal problems at their root. This approach is not necessarily negative and can also be non-violent, democratic, and contribute to positive social change. However, the term *radical Islam* is generally used synonymously with extremist or violent movements, blurring the lines between radical but legal political views and anti-constitutional or terrorist activities. The term *radical Islam* is therefore both analytically inadequate and socially problematic. It conceals the complexity of the phenomena described and can contribute to the proliferation of Islamophobic attitudes, which, as numerous studies have shown, are widespread across different age groups, educational backgrounds, and political camps (e.g. Kaddor et al. 2018; Pickel and Pickel 2023).

In academic discourse it is often recommended to use more precise terms such as *Islamism*, *Islamist extremism*, or *Salafism*. Islamism serves as a collective term for movements that seek to shape society and politics according to supposedly Islamic norms. However, these terms are also controversial and lack a universal definition. Terms such as *political Islam*, *Islamic fundamentalism*, and *jihadism* are often used synonymously, sometimes with overlapping meanings and sometimes to differentiate between the concepts. This leads to different terms being used for the same phenomenon and the same terms being used for different phenomena, which hinders conceptual clarity (Damir-Geilsdorf 2023, p. 10).

In addition, these terms are subject to multifaceted political instrumentalization. Like *radical Islam*, *political Islam* is also used in conservative and Islamophobic discourse to label any political engagement of Muslim actors as extremism and thereby defame them. A precise differentiation is therefore essential.

*Political Islam* refers to the promotion of Islamic values within democratic structures, whereas *political Islamism* aims to transform democratic systems along religious principles (e.g. Schmidinger 2021; Lenzen 2024). Particularly problematic is the blanket equation of Islamism with violence or terrorism. In fact, many Islamist groups act non-violently and limit themselves to legal political or missionary activities.

*Salafism*, in turn, is a specific strand within Islamism based on a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. There are different strands within Salafism, ranging from purist groups that reject violence to jihadist actors who consider violence to be a legitimate means (for an overview of the various facets and forms of

Salafism in Germany, see Biene et al. 2016). In public debates, Salafism is indiscriminately equated with jihadism, which obscures the true diversity of this movement (Damir-Geilsdorf 2023, p. 25).

*Jihadism* is understood as an ideological movement that declares the armed fight for the establishment of an Islamic social and political order to be a religious duty. Violence may be directed against non-Muslim rulers perceived as foreign occupiers, against politicians in predominantly Muslim countries who are considered to become 'apostates', or against supposed 'enemies of Islam' globally, as is the case with groups such as IS or Al-Qaeda. Due to their exclusivist understanding of Islam, jihadists also regard other Muslims as infidels and consider them their enemies (ibid., p. 18 f.).

It is important to note that there may be ideological and strategic overlaps in all these categories. Jihadist groups that are characterised by their advocacy of violence may temporarily refrain from violence for strategic reasons, making them difficult to classify for security authorities. The classification of certain groups and organisations into these subcategories of Islamism is therefore less clear-cut than it appears (ibid.).

The phenomena of *radicalisation* and (Islamist) *extremism* are also closely related, though not always in a linear sense. While radicalisation is understood as a process in which individuals or groups increasingly develop extreme beliefs and behaviours, extremism describes the manifest rejection of fundamental democratic values and the advocacy or use of violence to achieve ideological goals (e.g. Neumann 2013). The intersection between the two phenomena lies primarily in the question of when radicalisation turns into extremism, because not all radicalisation inevitably leads to extremism or violence.

Another intersection that adds to the complex nature of the issue arises between different types of phenomena, such as Islamist extremism and right-wing extremism. Although the ideological backgrounds of these two phenomena are different, there are parallels in the contributing factors and mechanisms in the radicalisation processes. These include social isolation, the need for belonging, and the appeal of simple answers to complex social questions (for individual factors, see, e.g., Srowig et al. 2018; Schneider 2023). These similarities offer the opportunity to develop comprehensive prevention strategies that focus on the individual, social, and societal factors of radicalisation. The challenge, however, is to not neglect the specific characteristics and dynamics of each phenomenon (c.f. Freiheit et al. 2021).

Furthermore, interactions between different ideological strands play a key role in the dynamics of radicalisation processes. Islamist actors often justify their ideology by referring to a supposed anti-Muslim 'crusade', discrimination against Muslims, or a 'war against Islam'. In turn, right-wing extremist actors justify their actions with reference to an alleged 'Islamisation' of society and a security threat associated with it. These reciprocal constructions of enemy images and the resulting escalation can lead to processes of co-radicalisation, in which both sides reinforce the views of the other.

The nexus between securitisation and stigmatisation is another key aspect in the debate on radicalisation and Islamism. Securitisation, i.e. the focus on security measures and the classification of radicalisation as a security problem, can lead to increased surveillance and monitoring of certain population groups. This carries the risk of placing Muslims or those perceived as Muslim under general suspicion, which increases stigmatisation and social exclusion (Bakali and Hafez 2022). Such processes can in turn promote radicalisation by reinforcing feelings of injustice and marginalisation.

The different terms and perspectives related to radicalisation, extremism, and Islamism illustrate the complexity of these issues. It is crucial to use these terms with precision to achieve analytical clarity and avoid generalised judgements. In particular, the blanket use of labels such as *Islamism* or *political* or *radical Islam* can lead to an undifferentiated conflation of very different individuals and groups. However, it wouldn't be a solution to accept the self-designations of groups without understanding their ideology and religious practices. Violent groups in particular frequently use 'neutral' nouns or adjectives in their names, such as *Islamic* or *Muslims*, to conceal their ideological goals (Damir-Geilsdorf 2023, p. 18).

Consequently, there can be no simple solution to the debate over terminology, because just as there is no such thing as a single *Islam*, there is no such thing as a single *Islamism*. Nevertheless, clear categorisations are

necessary to ensure analytical consistency and transparency in research, politics and the media. Careful use of terminology is essential to analyse the ideological and strategic orientation of actors who are described as Islamist in a differentiated manner. In doing so, it is essential not only to clarify which definitions are used by which actors in which context and for what reasons, but also to consider the specific dynamics and nuances of the respective movements.

## 3. Main Contents of the Volume

The authors of the chapters in this volume draw on a broad, nuanced understanding of radicalisation, extremism, Islamism, and the measures used to prevent and address them. The terms and definitions used in the book are the result of long and intensive discussions among the authors. They are to be understood primarily as working definitions that provide a shared conceptual framework.

The book is divided into 12 chapters that address key issues relating to Islamism, radicalisation, social polarisation, prevention, and the interactions between various social actors. The contributions reflect the results of several years of transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research on the complex phenomena of Islamism in Germany and Europe. They also offer valuable insights for practical, policy, and academic responses to the challenges of Islamism.

The opening chapters explore the dynamics in the field of Islamism. They analyse developments in social and security policy, public debates, and media discourse, as well as their impact on processes of polarisation and division that can lead to radicalisation.

The focus then shifts to the experiences of those directly affected. This includes, for example, Jews facing antisemitism within some Muslim communities, and Muslims encountering discrimination, state regulation, and anti-Muslim racism.

The initial chapters focus on theological and sociological aspects of Islamism and radicalisation—such as the social and historical context of sermons and religious discourse—and highlight the role of religion in dealing with grievances that can lead to radicalisation. Subsequent chapters examine potential drivers of radicalisation processes, including social, spatial, and affective factors. This is followed by analyses of the role of communication by various actors, such as the digital strategies of Islamist actors or communication strategies of Muslim organisations in the wake of terrorist attacks.

The concluding chapters focus on the socio-educational sector, addressing how schools serve as forums for negotiating social, cultural, and religious issues, and the challenges faced by educators and social workers in preventing Islamist radicalisation.

## 4. Recommendations

The book's findings indicate that addressing the challenges of Islamism and radicalisation requires an integrative and interdisciplinary approach. Educational initiatives, political and public awareness campaigns, stronger cooperation between government and civil-society actors, and the active participation of Muslim communities are direly needed.

### A cross-sectoral approach to prevention: empowering civil society and strengthening research infrastructure

Despite numerous funding initiatives, there is a lack of long-term, cross-sectoral research structures. The research budget for this field remains comparatively low, which hinders continuity. Long-term panel and longitudinal studies of at least 10 years are necessary to empirically examine radicalisation processes, Muslim identities, everyday experiences, and transnational influences. Using security agency data in a transparent way and in compliance with legal and ethical standards is essential in this context. There is also a need for improved integration of research and for innovative formats that combine prevention and knowledge transfer.

This requires greater sensitivity in political and scientific communication and should not be constrained by short-term political agendas.

Effective prevention strategies target places where people come together, such as schools, youth groups, workplaces, universities, and social media. Outreach programmes and social work can reach individuals in their everyday environment. Education on democracy and tolerance should be increased to prevent radicalisation and avoid stigmatisation, because many young people today grow up in milieus that do not share democratic values or that are extremist.

Many studies in this volume show that problematic radicalisation processes emerge locally and in digital networks. Prevention must therefore offer services that are seamlessly integrated both locally and online. Youth welfare services, schools, and clubs play a key role in this regard. Accordingly, permanently funded structures and confidence in local prevention work are essential.

Finally, municipalities and federal states need more autonomy, resources, and better networking. Because Germany's federal structure presents challenges, more funding for local initiates is vital for effective prevention.

**Actively addressing the transnational dimension of Islamism:**

Radicalisation processes intersect with migration, climate change, economic crises, and evolving information ecosystems. Comprehensive research into the interplay of global, transnational, national, and local processes is therefore necessary, including perspectives from outside Europe. At the same time, there is a need for differentiated communication and open dialogue that integrates people from different religious, cultural, and political backgrounds. This includes interreligious exchange, for example, between Muslims and Jews, as well as an intra-Muslim discourse that acknowledges the diversity of Islamic communities. This diversity should also be reflected in educational and teaching materials.

**Comprehensive civic and social education as the foundation for effective prevention**

School textbooks and teaching materials should promote social and political self-efficacy. Topics such as radicalisation prevention, interculturalism, the promotion of democracy, and anti-racism work should be anchored more firmly in teacher training and humanities studies. The aim is to prepare teachers and educational professionals to develop strategies that consider young people‘s lived experiences and promote intercultural understanding. Discriminatory structures should be dismantled, and the experiences of Muslims must be taken seriously.

Intercultural and interreligious friendships as well as extracurricular encounters break down prejudices and strengthen social skills. Prevention projects should take greater account of the lived realities of Muslims and create opportunities that promote social understanding and democratic participation. Civic education and cultural programmes require continuous and adequate funding to foster a pluralistic society. Spaces for democratic engagement – including self-organised initiatives by immigrants and Muslims – should be maintained and expanded.

Well-trained educational staff are needed to implement these measures. Teachers, social workers, and other professionals require targeted training in radicalisation prevention, intercultural conflicts, and discrimination. Topics such as intercultural competence, anti-discrimination, and relationship building should be an integral part of their education and professional development. This strengthens teachers' confidence in dealing with religious conflicts and enables them to recognise radicalisation tendencies at an early stage and provide professional support. Closer ties to the fields of social work and education can contribute to further professionalisation. Support and counselling services for educators should be expanded. ■

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# Chapter 2: No One Wakes Up in the Morning and Suddenly Becomes Radical. Why Do People radicalise?

## Conditions and Consequences of Co-Radicalisation Processes

*Susanne Pickel (Project RIRA)*

### 1. Background

Media reporting on radicalisation processes usually begins only after they have developed into extremism. This is most often the case when a (usually male) perpetrator has committed an act of violence. The explanation for the radicalisation typically focuses on the perpetrator's socialisation, their consumption of certain (social) media, or their background. The ideological motivation behind the act is mentioned, if at all, only as a secondary factor (Abay Gaspar et al., 2019, p. 17). However, it is precisely this ideological conviction that is central to the act of violence. Such acts are not directed solely, and perhaps not even primarily, at the victims themselves. They are generally aimed at society as a whole and its norms and values. Violence perpetrated by ethnonationalist and Islamist extremists is, in most cases, a declaration of war against the liberal democratic order.

To better understand why people radicalise, several key questions need to be addressed: What does radicalisation mean? How is it related to extremism? What role does violence play in radicalisation processes? How does belonging to social groups contribute to the process of radicalisation? Following Ebner's (2017) conclusion that the radicalisation of groups does not occur in a vacuum, it is also necessary to ask what links exist between Islamist and far-right extremism and whether, and how, radicalisation processes in both ideologies might reinforce one another.

Triggers for radicalisation processes typically involve a loss of purpose, whether on a personal or social level. Individuals may feel they are losing control over their lives (Fritsche et al., 2024). The experience of being unable to determine one's own path, feeling marginalised, pushed around, bullied, not taken seriously, or not recognised as an individual or as a member of a group becomes a dominant part of one's worldview (Fritsche et al., 2011).

The authoritarian right has succeeded, at least in part, in shifting public discourse in a way that has fostered prejudice, hatred, and agitation against migrants. This shift has increased public susceptibility to anti-Muslim and Islamophobic worldviews (Pickel et al., 2023; Pickel & Öztürk, 2022; Öztürk & Pickel, 2021; Pickel, 2024a, 2024b; Spielhaus, 2011; Strabac & Listhaug, 2007). At the core of anti-Muslim hostility are exclusionary constructions of identity and perceptions of threat. These feelings of threat are often rooted in the belief that individuals have lost personal agency and that their social group no longer holds influence in society. In response, people turn to a collective "we" identity (Turner et al., 1987; Fritsche, 2022), which is defined in opposition to groups perceived as foreign.

Islamist radicalisation processes share some of these patterns but also exhibit specific features. Experiences of rejection, marginalisation, discrimination, and especially racist violence, along with fears that such experiences may be repeated, give rise to the desire to restore collective and individual recognition and to regain personal and social control (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Fritsche, 2022). A stronger emphasis on in-group belonging may lead to withdrawal into the Muslim community and the adoption of a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. This can, in turn, increase the appeal of Islamist ideologies within certain parts of migrant communities (Aydin et al., 2010; Verkuyten, 2018).

Referencing other rejected groups can contribute to the reinforcement of radicalisation. These processes can be described as a spiral that develops between two groups holding fundamentally opposing political ideologies or religious beliefs.

The project „Radical Islam vs. Radical Anti-Islam“ (RIRA) examined both right-wing and Islamist forms of radicalism. Using various empirical methods, it explored different pathways into radicalisation. The central research question was whether it is possible to identify a spiral of radicalisation that emerges from a generally negative societal climate and intensifies over time, ultimately leading to escalating radicalisation among both Islamist and anti-Islamist groups.

## 2. Methodology

To investigate the research question a representative population survey was conducted between early March and late May 2022, in cooperation with the *Leipzig Authoritarianism Study* (LAS). A total of 2,522 individuals provided information about their attitudes toward authoritarianism, nationalism, chauvinism, antisemitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and political culture.

Additionally, in the second half of 2022, a sample of Muslims living in Germany was surveyed to enable comparisons between Muslim and non-Muslim populations. A total of 607 respondents answered the same attitude-related questions as well as additional questions regarding experiences of discrimination and religious beliefs. However, this sample should not be considered representative of all Muslims living in Germany, as there is no comprehensive statistical data on the overall Muslim population. Despite efforts to achieve broad coverage through quota sampling and diverse recruitment methods, the generalisability of the results remains limited. The data primarily reflect the views and experiences of the specific group surveyed and cannot be extrapolated to the entire Muslim population in Germany.

In a separate study, teachers were surveyed regarding their perceptions of students‘ religious and political attitudes and behaviours, in relation to their own beliefs. An online survey of 405 teachers was conducted in Germany in December 2023.

In addition, an analysis was carried out on how Islam is portrayed in school textbooks—an important factor, given that textbooks significantly shape public perceptions of Muslims and influence the broader social climate.

Drawing on several additional data sources—including group discussions, interviews about radicalisation motives, interviews with social workers and prevention practitioners, and case studies from prevention work—insights were developed regarding how to address radical behaviour. Various prevention tools tailored to specific target groups and based on needs and available resources were created. These include initiatives to strengthen discourse skills and resilience against radical influences, promote democratic values, prevent radicalisation in the classroom, and enhance the understanding and integration of Islam in religious education.

## 3. Key Findings

### Spiral of radicalisation

a. Radical Islam

Perceived discrimination among Muslims can lead to withdrawal into one’s in-group and a turn toward radical religious interpretation. Fear of discrimination by non-Muslims is widespread: around 40% of Muslim respondents expressed concern about discrimination and racist violence. This fear is not unfounded—approximately 45% reported having experienced discrimination due to their religious affiliation. The main sources of discrimination identified were individuals with far-right extremist views (34%) and individuals perceived as non-Muslim (41%). Public institutions were also frequently perceived as discriminatory.

Once a person has experienced discrimination, fear of future discrimination tends to persist. Importantly, it is not the identity of the discriminators that matters most, but the mere fact of having been discriminated against. Such experiences heighten awareness of belonging to a group distinct from the majority society. An indirect effect then becomes significant: discrimination, particularly within institutions, is strongly associated with the feeling of losing control over one’s own life. When those affected respond by identifying more strongly

with their own group in search of meaning and begin to distance themselves from others, a stage in the radicalisation process is reached that is difficult to reverse.

Survey data show that, for many Muslim individuals, the consequences of these experiences often correlate with withdrawal into one's in-group, gravitation toward fundamentalist religious practices, development of hostile attitudes (for example, toward the Jewish community), rejection of democracy, and the adoption of radical views.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents identify with the Muslim community. Around half consider Islam the only true religion and place the Qur'an, for themselves personally, above German laws. Approximately one-third believe that only Islam can solve today's problems or express a desire to return to a social order resembling that of the Prophet's age. Nearly 40% of Muslim respondents view Jews as deceitful, peculiar, or overly influential, and reject them on that basis (Öztürk and Pickel 2023). Just under two-thirds are willing to accept autocratic restrictions on democracy. They combine their sense of legitimacy towards democracy ("Democracy suits our society best") with a longing for a strong leader, the desire for an ethnically defined one-party system, or, under certain circumstances, the view that a dictatorship may be a better form of government. Around 11% of respondents, at the final stage of radicalisation, would be willing to accept or use violence to pursue their interests and needs.

Subsequent analyses show that a strong sense of group belonging enhances an individual's social significance. Feelings of threat are often resolved through religious fundamentalism and a willingness to engage in violence. Religious fundamentalism also fosters hostile attitudes toward Jews. These attitudes are further reinforced by factors such as the perceived importance of one's group identity, a sense of lost control, authoritarian thinking, conspiratorial mindsets, and a tendency toward social dominance. Anti-system attitudes are particularly likely to appear when traditional antisemitic beliefs are also present.

At the same time, the analyses show that experiences of discrimination do not automatically lead to radicalisation. However, they do strengthen identification with one's in-group, which in turn can have both direct and indirect effects on radical attitudes.

b. Radical Anti-Islam

Radical anti-Muslim attitudes, which are largely rooted in far-right beliefs, show similar patterns. However, these attitudes arise not from personal experiences of discrimination, but from fears of Islam and concerns about Islamist violence. Such perceptions of threat and anti-Islamic views are not limited to the far right but are widespread across German society.

Among non-Muslims, a notable sense of threat is common. Around 30% of the surveyed individuals report feeling personally threatened by Islam. Nearly half of respondents consider Muslims to be dangerous, and almost 40% identify with those who hold critical views of Islam. Just over 20% fear they could become victims of Islamist violence. In this context, many emphasise their own group identity and regard Muslims as outsiders. About 44% of non-Muslims respondents believe that Muslims in general wish to introduce *Sharia* law in Germany and to Islamise the West. Roughly 42% think that Muslim youth sympathise with Islamist terrorism. Here, the perception of Muslims as Islamists often blends with broader attitudes toward Islam in Germany.

Approximately 41% seek to counter their sense of threat by promoting national power—by enhancing Germany's power and prestige (20% agree, 30% partly agree), by forcefully and assertively advancing German interests (30%/20%), and by fostering a strong sense of national pride (30%/30%). Around half of non-Muslim respondents are willing to accept restrictions on the liberal democratic order. A little over 80% view democracy as the political system best suited to our society. However, a significant portion of non-Muslims can imagine—or even prefer—a nationalist one-party regime (15%/25%), a strong leader (7%/15%), or even a dictatorship (5%/12%).

Around 4% accept violence against Muslims. About 12% believe violence is necessary to bring about social change. 7% express understanding for violent critics of Islam, while 4% would participate in anti-Islam demonstrations even if they involved breaking the law.

Further analyses show that the more importance individuals place on their in-group identity, the more likely they are to attribute Islamist tendencies to all Muslims. Further, the stronger this sense of attribution is, the more likely people are to adopt chauvinistic views. As these views intensify, they more often embrace anti-system positions. Such positions are closely tied to radical attitudes, including acceptance of violence and a willingness to use it.

### Teacher Survey

Between 15% and 22% of surveyed teachers report noticing discrimination against Muslim students or observe that they suffer from widespread anti-Muslim sentiment. Thus, even within schools, there are already signs of discriminatory experiences that can lead to withdrawal into one's in-group and the beginning of radicalisation processes.

At the same time, teachers also recognise problems in the relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim students. 29% report that these groups tend to provoke one another, and about one-third believe that some Muslim students display a sense of superiority toward their non-Muslim peers.

It is concerning that 59% of teachers say their students have only a rudimentary understanding of what democracy is and how it works. 38% of surveyed teachers think that some students bring fundamentalist Christian beliefs from home, whereas 65% suspect the same among Muslim students regarding fundamentalist Muslim beliefs. Additionally, 59% of teachers see a transfer of right-wing extremist attitudes from the home into the school setting. However, only 7% of teachers report frequently witnessing conflicts between Muslim students and right-wing-oriented students. Almost one in ten teachers say they have often encountered conflicts rooted in religious reasons or disputes over religious interpretations.

Teachers' assessments are also linked to their own attitudes toward Islam. Those with more negative views are less likely to take defensive stances. Accordingly, among teachers with anti-Muslim attitudes, only half (11%) believe that Muslim students suffer from general Islamophobia.

Overall, there is a significant perceived need for further training on topics such as right-wing extremism and Islamist radicalisation. More than half of the teachers surveyed also wish for a stronger integration of Islam-related topics into the curriculum. The most popular informational resources are short brochures (63%) and prevention programs targeting Islamist (51%) and right-wing extremist (43%) radicalisation.

### Textbook Analysis

Analyses by Shalaby and Spielhaus (2023, p. 328) identify three main contexts in which Islam is taught in schools. The first is civic education, where Islam appears in lessons on democracy. The second covers security and peace, including human rights, wars, armed conflicts, and global peace. The third focuses on migration and cultural diversity. In all three areas, examples often highlight religious extremism, Salafism, or Islamist terrorism. This approach can give the false impression that Islam as a religion is synonymous with its political or extremist forms.

When lessons address extremism or terrorism, they frequently link these topics to the backgrounds of individual Islamists. Islam is sometimes portrayed as part of a "clash of civilisations" or as a threat to democracy (Shalaby and Spielhaus 2023). Negative examples depict Islam as a violent and uncompromising faith. In such cases, textbooks illustrate threats under headings like "Religious Extremism: Islamism."

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

So, when do people wake up in the morning as radicals? Mainly when they are afraid and believe they have lost control over their lives; when they can then join a group that welcomes them and bolsters their self-esteem; when they adopt a narrative that emphasises the importance of their in-group and its values and norms while marginalising other groups and questioning their equality; when they develop an enemy image and a sense of dominance over other social groups; when they nurture authoritarian beliefs, giving rise to hostility toward democracy; and when they long for a strong leader. In such cases, it is very likely that a person will wake up in the morning radicalised and willing to resort to violence.

Prevention and social work must be carefully balanced, both within and outside of schools. A peaceful coexistence in a diverse society can only be achieved through recognition, appreciation, and respect. Effective strategies typically take the form of outreach-based prevention or educational and social initiatives. Such strategies aim to help individuals in schools, youth groups, workplaces, universities, or online and on social media platforms.

Strategies to counter radicalisation are effective when they:

- address young people in their particular life circumstances and with their individual concerns
- begin helping young people to articulate their interests and foster respectful interaction with others within the school curriculum, emphasising commonalities
- take young people seriously, encourage their self-initiative, allow them to experience democracy, and openly challenge hierarchical structures
- provide positive role models within social groups
- demonstrate respect and appreciation toward young people.

The foundation for the success of these strategies is an intensified, active, and democratic political and social education. Suitable teaching materials, textbooks, and both school-based and extracurricular programs are essential. These efforts should aim to promote adolescents' and young adults' sense of societal and political agency, as well as strengthen their social problem-solving skills. ■

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# Chapter 3: Germany‘s Societal and Political Responses to Islamism – An overview of Trends and Key Challenges

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## 1. Background

Questions about how to respond to Islamist actors or to violence planned or carried out in the name of Islam have dominated media and political discourse at various points over the past two decades. The focus has been on both state security measures and civil society prevention strategies, which have yet to be examined in systematic empirical studies.

The project “Configurations of societal and political practices in dealing with radical Islam” (KURI) focused on analysing trends in Germany’s political, security, and societal responses to Islamism. In Germany, the attacks of September 11, 2001, prompted numerous countermeasures and extensive legal reforms. At the same time, a wide range of civil society activities and funding programmes emerged, reflecting different perceptions of the problem and different approaches to its solution.

To provide a comprehensive overview of how Germany deals with Islamism, the following questions were explored:

(1) What trends can be identified in the political, security, and societal responses to Islamism in Germany since 2001?

(2) How can the complex and unpredictable security problem of terrorism be tackled within the framework of the rule of law, particularly in view of the trade-off between freedom and security?

(3) How are the measures taken against Islamism perceived beyond practice, i.e. within broader society?”

(4) To what extent does the threat perception with regard to Islamism differ from the threat perception associated with other phenomena that fall under the umbrella term ‘extremism’?

## 2. Methodology

Four lines of analysis were combined:

First, a long-term study documented all events attributable to the phenomenon of Islamism and key legal changes implemented to deal with it. An analysis of the *modus operandi* of Islamist actors in Germany since 2001 was carried out using the relevant databases on terrorist attacks, publicly available data from security authorities, and media reports. In addition, every federal anti-terror law passed between 2001 and 2023 was compiled in a database and analysed to trace legal changes and their consequences.

Secondly, qualitative case study analyses were conducted to examine trends in security authorities‘ framing of threats, debates on how to deal with Islamism in the German Bundestag, trends in media coverage, and the main operative measures taken against Islamism.

Thirdly, between March 2023 and August 2024, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors from administrative and security authorities, civil society, and politics to capture their self-perceptions and threat assessments, measures, and institutional frameworks relating to Islamism.

Finally, surveys and survey experiments were conducted. Participants from the German population were surveyed in four waves over the course of a year in an online experiment. The surveys focused on perceptions of the threat posed by Islamism, right-wing extremism, and left-wing extremism, as well as support for various security policy measures.

## 3. Key Findings

### Islamist activities between 2001 and 2023

Between 2001 and 2023, 15 violent attacks with Islamist motives were carried out in Germany, killing 21 people and injuring at least 120. Most attacks were carried out by individual perpetrators. While from 2017 there was a decline in attacks and preparatory activities, 2021 and 2023 saw a resurgence of suspected cases and related activities.

Regarding the political activities of Islamists, from 2003 onwards, video propaganda and threats initially predominated, followed by large-scale street campaigns such as the Qur’an distribution campaign „*Lies!*“ (English: „Read!“) in 2015/2016. At present, small-scale missionary work and a ‘retreat into private life’ (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution 2022, p. 196) tend to prevail, although an increase in public activities has been observed again since 2021/2022 (State Office for the Protection of the Constitution of North Rhine-Westphalia 2022, p. 218).

Many of the fears surrounding the threat of Islamism after September 11, 2001, have not materialised. It seems fair to assume that this is related to the expanded powers and resources of security authorities since 2001, which have prevented several attacks while at the same time putting considerable prosecutorial pressure on Islamist scenes.

### Legislative changes since 2001

Between 2001 and 2023, a total of 80 anti-terrorism laws were passed and the powers of security agencies were systematically expanded. Changes mainly concerned the collection, processing, and exchange of data. Intelligence and police forces were given more leeway to act in cases of imminent danger, for example, with regard to electronic surveillance, searches, and the creation of extensive databases. Numerous measures were adopted relating to border control, infrastructure, and civil protection, as well as measures to curb terrorist funding.

Fewer, but more far-reaching, changes were made in criminal law. One example is the Act on the Prosecution of Preparations for Serious Acts of Violence Endangering the State (German: “Gesetz zur Verfolgung der Vorbereitung schwerer staatsgefährdender Gewalttaten”, GVVG), which made preparatory activities punishable and broadened the scope of criminal justice. In addition, there were several amendments to residence law, which were also aimed at combating terrorism.

These trends indicate a normalisation of counter-terrorism measures, which were no longer related solely to specific terrorist attacks but were described as a necessary part of the security authorities‘ standard repertoire.

### Security agencies’ portrayal of threats

While the intensity of the portrayal of the threat posed by Islamism in the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution’s reports fluctuated between 2001 and 2013, there was a general increase from 2014 to 2018. In 2016 and 2017, it was emphasised most strongly that an attack could occur in Germany “at any time” (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution 2017, p. 155; 2018, p. 164). Subsequently, the level of threat portrayal decreased again, although it remained high. In 2019, the threat from Islamism was described as “subliminal and diffuse” (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution 2020, p. 173). Since the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023, the Office has once again recorded an increase in the level of threat, accompanied by a sharp rise in criminal offences.

### Debates in the German Bundestag

The parliamentary groups in the Bundestag were largely in agreement on the need for measures to combat Islamism. However, opinions differed, in some cases significantly, on how exactly the state should act and how far it should be allowed to go. One key point that emerged was the need to address the complex and difficult-to-assess threat posed by the early stages of Islamism. Overall, calls for more state powers prevailed over demands for restraint and fears of creating a 'security state'.

With its entry into government at the end of 2021, the so-called "Ampelkoalition" (traffic light coalition) initiated a shift in the discourse in the Bundestag and placed greater emphasis on combating right-wing extremism. Speakers from the coalition exercised considerable restraint in calling for further measures, particularly the expansion of powers of security authorities, and called for more emphasis on prevention and civic education.

### Depictions of threat and calls for action in the media (German newspapers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die WELT*)

Media coverage increased sharply in the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks, with discussions focusing on the circumstances and consequences of the acts, as well as the backgrounds and presumed motives of attackers. Regarding the portrayal of threats, reports not only highlighted fears of Islamist attacks in Germany, but also rising anti-Muslim sentiment, societal polarisation, and threats to democratic and constitutional values. The calls for action related both to the repressive treatment of Islamism and to preventive measures and efforts to avoid societal division. Overall, even in peak periods after terrorist attacks, coverage was balanced.

### Measures against Islamism in Germany

An analysis of developments in measures against Islamism following the September 11 attacks revealed not only an expansion of powers for security authorities, early criminalisation and the creation of databases, but also the facilitation of preventive approaches by the state and civil society. The latter focused primarily on radicalisation processes.

In the months after the attacks of September 11, the adoption of two packages of security measures led to a series of legislative changes designed to restrict the scope of action of international terrorist organisations and prevent the preparation of attacks. Further legislation was introduced in the following years. From 2001 onwards, security authorities were granted additional powers for far-reaching surveillance measures. Following the attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005) it became clear that violent extremism and terrorism cannot be prevented or combated through repressive measures alone, resulting in an increasing shift of focus to civil society initiatives. This trend was consolidated by the 2010s with the expansion of federal programmes such as 'Demokratie Leben!' ('Live Democracy!').

### Self-perceptions of state and civil society actors

Interviews with administrative, security, civil society, and political actors reveal that threat assessments vary depending on institutional affiliation and region. Yet despite certain fluctuations, those interviewed shared the common feature of describing Islamism as a highly significant yet abstract threat. However, interviewees also pointed out that the threat posed by terrorist attacks in recent years is lower than it was between 2015 and 2017, and that right-wing extremism now constitutes a greater danger.

Politicians who were interviewed after the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, reassessed the threat level posed by Islamism as high. By comparison, civil society actors frequently pointed to widespread lack of knowledge about Islam and discriminatory attitudes among teachers and police officers. Therefore, in the view of civil actors, efforts to combat anti-Muslim racism should be expanded in terms of funding and structure, and anti-discrimination topics should be incorporated more effectively into teacher and police training. Security authorities report that domestic security services and police have become more professional and sensitive in their efforts to combat Islamism.

The respondents believed that significant developments in the field of combating Islamism were determined by wave-like shifts in attention in politics and the media, leading to action for action’s sake. Measures against Islamism were introduced in cyclical patterns and often justified with reference to specific events or as an adaptation to the changing modus operandi of Islamists.

### Individual perceptions of and attitudes towards handling Islamism among the German population

Survey participants support government measures to varying degrees and contingent upon the specific phenomenon. On average, concerning Islamism there was particularly strong support for grid searches and preventive detention, while the use of maximum penalties and surveillance received particularly little support in relation to left wing extremism. Support for the measures was linked to a perceived ‘threat to Germany’. In addition, political self-identification on a right-left spectrum played a significant role: while people on the far right of the spectrum were particularly favourable towards measures against left wing extremism and Islamism, but less so towards measures against right wing extremism, people on the far left of the spectrum were particularly supportive of measures against right-wing extremism.

Considered together, participants on average rated right-wing extremism as most threatening to Germany, followed by Islamism and left-wing extremism. Threat perceptions tended to fluctuate more than support for measures, which appeared to remain stable over the longer term. Specifically, the last survey wave in November/December 2023 showed an increase in the perception of Islamism as a threat. This can be interpreted as a reaction to the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent escalation of Israel-Palestine conflict.

In summary, it can be said that threat perceptions are ‘phenomenon-specific’ and that people who situate themselves at the margins of the political spectrum attribute greater priority to repression against particular forms of extremism.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results show that there is a tendency to move counter-extremist measures up into the pre-criminal phase, focusing on early signs of radicalisation. At the same time, the analyses clearly show that security policy measures have not been unduly prioritised in recent years. Instead, influenced at least in part by the rulings of the Federal Constitutional Court, reactions to specific incidents typically struck a balance between alarmism and restraint.

At the same time, the expanded powers of security agencies—such as new inter-agency relationships and cooperation centres, the enhancement of databases, and the adoption of new surveillance technologies—have become entrenched structural features that will endure even as security threats change. These trends underline the constant tension between security and freedom and how public threat perceptions shape political and law-enforcement priorities.

Dealing with Islamism is inherently complex; countermeasures are shaped by federal structures, legal frameworks, institutional interests, and long-standing security and social-policy practices. They cannot be fully addressed by a single short-term study. Debates on control and review procedures and the evaluation of security legislation provided for in the coalition agreement of the traffic light coalition further highlight the urgent need for academic analysis of long-term trends in this field. ■

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# Chapter 4: From the Margins to the Main Stream? Right-Wing Populist Interpretations of Islam and Practice-Oriented Recommendations

*Anna-Maria Meuth, Max Manuel Brunner, Liriam Sponholz, Mirjam Weiberg and Sabrina Zajak (Project RaMi)*

## 1. Background

The project "From the Margins to the Mainstream? Right-wing Populist Interpretations of Islam as a Societal Challenge in Germany, Europe and Beyond" (RaMi), starts from the observation that fear and uncertainty about Islam—often as an assumed entity—are widespread across European societies. It suggests that the rise of right-wing populism in Western European democracies (Germany, France and the United Kingdom are used as case studies) has become a key factor in the framing of Islam as a threat. The study therefore asks whether, how, under what conditions, and in which direction public discourse has shifted in recent decades as far-right populist narratives link national identity and Muslim migration with depictions of Islam as radical.

Social mechanisms have enabled established actors in politics, churches, and civil society to absorb and normalise far-right ideas and values (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Wodak 2018, 2020). The rise of far-right/ right-wing populist parties in the countries studied would have been impossible without the support of mass media. Frequent appearances on talk shows and in newspaper interviews have made far-right figures accepted players in the political arena.

Populists have also mastered social media, using the platforms with notable skill and impact (Serrano et al. 2019; Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017). The rapid mediatisation of politics, which often portrays Islam as radical and threatening, has been key to the spread of far-right, right-wing populist narratives. In recent decades, the intolerance and denigration of Islam and Muslims has become increasingly normal in both the media and political debate (Sponholz et al. 2023). The central question, therefore, is whether Islamophobic far-right populist narratives have shifted "from the margins to the mainstream". In other words, have these narratives become normalized within democratic societies, and how are far-right actors triggering and exploiting them?

## 2. Methodology

The project involved analysing the historical context of each country, as well as conducting automated and manual content analyses of newspaper articles and semi-structured qualitative interviews. The context analyses compared far-right/right-wing populist parties in France, Germany, and the UK. It focused on how these parties constructed Islam and migration as threats and traced their historical developments.

The study examined, using media reports, under what conditions and in which direction public (media) discourse about Islam and Muslims has taken shape and evolved over the past 20 years. To achieve this, the coverage of related articles in leading national newspapers in Germany, the UK, and France (S*üddeutsche Zeitung, DIE WELT, The Guardian, The Times, Libération,* and *Le Figaro*) was analysed.

The study addressed four key questions:

(1) To what extent does media coverage focus on the topics of Islam and Muslims?

(2) What caused or generated (e.g. events) the greatest media attention between 2000 and 2020?

(3) At the peak of media attention, which social actors are we seeing speaking out about Islam and Muslims in the media?

(4) How do these actors interpret Islam?

First, a time series analysis was conducted to measure the frequency with which Islam was reported between 2000 and 2020. This was followed by an automated analysis of the content of articles published within four weeks of the most significant spikes in media attention.

The study analysed the most frequently used words and word combinations to identify whether a particular event had triggered a surge in attention. A random sample of 600 articles was drawn from the pool of identified articles for further manual content analysis. This was the second step, which aimed to determine which actors spoke out in the four weeks following each spike in attention. The actors' statements were also coded according to the associations evoked by references such as crime, terrorism, gender, demographics, disease, genetics, backwardness, discrimination, economic burden, sexuality, antisemitism.

Finally, guided semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 stakeholders from local politics, public administration, and (inter)religious civil society organisations in Germany and the UK in 2022/2023. These interviews focused on how anti-Muslim narratives spread through society and on their impact for interviewees.

## 3. Key Findings

The analysis shows that the current far-right interpretations of Islam must be considered in the context of long-standing discursive patterns. Furthermore, similar developments occurred simultaneously across many Western European societies. Historical context analyses trace the origins of these normalisation processes back to the 1970s. Since the early 2000s, the Far Right in Western democracies has framed Islam as a threat to so-called Western civilisation, creating a new image of an opposing enemy. However, right-wing populism did not initiate the discourse on Islam in the newspapers studied in Germany, the UK, and France. Instead, it amplified conventional media reporting over several decades.

A longitudinal study of media coverage found that newspapers placed Islam and Muslim communities much higher on their agendas after the Islamist attacks of September 11, 2001. In 2000, the average number of daily articles on this topic ranged from 2.6 to 5 per title. In 2001, that average roughly doubled in almost every dataset. This increase proved durable; over the next twenty years, the daily average of articles remained above the year 2000 level in nearly all collections.

Media coverage on the topics of Islam and Muslims has largely focused on acts of terrorism. Depending on the newspaper and the particular events in a given year, approximately one out of every three articles on Islam and Muslims references a terrorist attack. This has a significant impact on public perception, as it reinforces the idea that Islam is linked to violence or terrorism. Interestingly, far-right/right-wing populist actors account for only a small proportion (around 1%) of such public statements—and it is only from around 2010 onwards that their influence becomes visible.

The actor analysis revealed that government officials and public authorities are the most likely individuals to speak in the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks. Media professionals—such as journalists, public intellectuals, and news outlets—are the ones, who most frequently associate Islam and Muslims with terrorism and backwardness. By contrast, contributors of the general public are far less likely to make these associations.

Expert interviews reveal that everyday anti-Muslim racism is important for the growing acceptance of far-right/right-wing populist views in spreading hostile and excluding narratives. This form of racism becomes especially evident in political decision-making processes and in opportunities for participation and civic engagement. The rise of right-wing populist parties in parliament has underscored its threatening impact. Several contextual factors and manifestations were identified within local politics and civil society:

(1) Institutional racism manifests as politically tactical defamation, employed to maintain or expand power.

(2) Barriers to political participation and influence stem from a partly lack of diversity in office appointments and party staff recruitment, with variations across regions.

(3) A lack of transparency in informal decision-making processes can result in marginalised groups' perspectives being poorly considered.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

A key finding is that when radical ideologies become normalised within Western European democracies, the consequences extend beyond the radicalisation of isolated individuals or fringe groups. The mainstream also becomes or remains radicalised (Sponholz & Meuth et al. 2025), while radical ideas rise to the level of accepted or defended norms (Quent and Virchow 2024; Zick et al. 2023). These ideological shifts—and their root causes and enabling conditions—must be highlighted and addressed, as they pose a direct threat to democracy and its future development.

### Recommendations for Researchers

It is necessary to broaden perspectives in both democracy and radicalisation research. Rather than focusing narrowly on extremist fringes and predefined social groups, studies should examine the ongoing dynamics of normalisation and de-normalisation among the various actors at the mainstream of society. When selecting samples for media discourse analyses relating to Islam and Muslims, researchers must pay closer attention to the way coverage is driven by specific events, particularly terrorist attacks. It is also crucial to critique the disproportionate number of articles linking Islam to terrorism, as they obscure other discussions involving Islam. Finally, research priorities should include alternative communication channels such as social media and messaging services, to understand their role in the spread of radical ideas, or in their countering.

### Recommendations for Authorities and Policymakers

The intensity of media coverage of terrorist attacks is not only a decisive factor in public debates on Islam, but is also evolving rapidly, manifesting within a matter of days. Government spokespeople and security agencies play a major role in portraying Islam as threatening and backward. They may be echoing anti-Islam and anti-migration agendas promoted by far-right populists. In order to counter Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, politicians and authorities should develop communication strategies in advance of any terrorist incident. This will ensure that responses are free of discrimination and suitable for dissemination in the media.

Investment is also required in order to expand political education and programmes that foster a democratic culture. Building and strengthening democratic alliances should result in concrete projects that advance democratic progress. Marginalised groups should be given appropriate social recognition, and their public visibility should be increased. Finally, clear evaluation tools should be implemented to regularly monitor the effectiveness of measures against Islamophobia and the normalisation of far-right populism.

### Recommendations for Media and Journalists

Journalists need more training in reporting on terrorism in order to accurately assess the relationships between different parties in a conflict and terrorist organisations. The broad association of terrorism with Islam or Muslims must be avoided and actively challenged. The narrative links between democratic and far-right actors should be examined closely to understand their purpose and context, since the links can pave the way for normalising far-right ideas, such as ethnonationalist ideology. Countering this trend means engaging critically with racist positions within mainstream discourse. ■

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# Chapter 5: How do Jews living in Germany experience and interpret political-Islamist antisemitism?

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## 1. Background

Antisemitism is a 'collective action problem' (Reimer-Gordinskaya and Tzschiesche 2021, p. 34) that Jewish individuals face daily. Anticipating antisemitic incidents, deciding how to respond, and making sense of those experiences are inescapable challenges for Jews and can have serious consequences for their everyday lives and well-being.

Political-Islamist antisemitism (PIA) has emerged as a major social challenge and is now a focal point of public debate and research. Many Jewish victims attribute antisemitic acts to Muslim perpetrators and report that they perceive an increased threat from Muslim communities in recent years (Zick et al. 2017).

These findings reflect a long-running debate over whether and to what extent contemporary German antisemitism should be understood as a 'Muslim problem' (Öztürk and Pickel 2023). In this debate, researchers (e.g. Arnold 2018) rightly question the projective framing of 'imported antisemitism' with reference to the history of European and especially German antisemitism and the current prevalence of antisemitic attitudes in all social milieus. At the same time, research on antisemitism shows that antisemitism among Muslims has been widespread since long before the events in Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent global wave of antisemitism (Salzborn 2020; Jikeli 2019; Öztürk and Pickel 2022; Fischer and Wetzels 2024).

The study presented here builds on previous analyses of Jewish perspectives on antisemitism among Muslims and focuses on the following key questions:

(1) How do Jews experience antisemitism that they attribute to Muslim perpetrators in relation to antisemitism that they attribute to other perpetrators?

(2) How widespread are experiences of political-Islamist antisemitism and what criteria influence 'Islamically' motivated antisemitism?

## 2. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was chosen to explore experiences of antisemitism in everyday life and how individuals cope with them. Between October 2021 and February 2023, 21 qualitative problem-centred interviews were conducted with Jews, in which the interviewees were asked to talk about their recent everyday experiences with antisemitism and to describe incidents that had been particularly memorable for them. The interviews were analysed using a Grounded Theory approach.

The study drew on a phenomenologically oriented sociology of knowledge, based on the work of Schütz (1974). The approach emphasises subjective experiences within an intersubjectively shared social world. According to this approach, in everyday life we reciprocally assume that others understand the world in a manner comparable to our own. However, confrontation with antisemitism can make Jews realise that their counterparts interpret the shared world very differently – namely, through conscious or unconscious recourse to antisemitic narratives – and accordingly treat others differently. This also calls into question the assumption that everyday life—perceived as given—will continue to unfold in the future just as it does today, and that we will be able to influence it tomorrow in the same manner as we do now. The sudden intrusion of antisemitism into daily life can profoundly unsettle these certainties. antisemitism

In addition, a quantitative online survey was conducted between May 2022 and February 2023 to determine how widespread experiences with the PIA phenomenon and related perceptions are. The 295 participants were recruited via the email lists of Jewish communities, the ELES Jewish student services organisation and an advertisement on the website of the *Jüdische Allgemeine* newspaper. Participants were asked about their general understanding of antisemitism, their experiences with PIA, and the reasons for interpreting an act as 'Islamically motivated'.

A survey experiment was also conducted to examine the role that attributing radicalism plays in problem perception and an increased sense of threat. For this purpose, two experimental groups of approximately equal size were randomly selected from the sample. The first group answered questions about 'Muslims,' while the second answered questions about 'radical Muslims.' Three problem levels were differentiated: antisemitism as a general problem among (radical) Muslims, a general threat to Jews from (radical) Muslims, and a personal threat or concrete fear of (radical) Muslims. The latter has the greatest impact on the individual lives of the respondents and therefore requires more practical engagement.

## 3. Key Findings

### Interview study on experiences of antisemitism among affected persons

For many Jews, antisemitism is an everyday reality that influences their perception of safety, participation, and self-determination. The interviews reveal that the recent emphasis put on Muslim antisemitism by researchers and the public (Zick et al. 2017; Bundesverband RIAS 2023a, 2023b) is not reflected in the experiences of those potentially affected. For the interviewees, the experience of Muslim antisemitism is structurally identical to other experiences of antisemitism. The potential experience of PIA is part of an everyday reality in which Jews are exposed to antisemitic insults and attacks in very different areas and by very different groups of people.

The analysis of interview passages about experiences of confrontation with antisemitism shows that three core constraints emerge when facing antisemitism:

First, Jews experience that the predictability of antisemitism is limited. Although there are situations in everyday life in which respondents can prepare themselves for possible experiences of antisemitism—for example, in the context of anti-Israel demonstrations or in the comment sections on social media platforms—Jews can still encounter antisemitism in situations where they would not have expected it.

Second, confrontation with antisemitism forces Jews to adjust their everyday priorities and deal with issues and threats that they have not chosen themselves. This forced interaction creates immediate pressure to act and disrupts daily routines. Finally, as the confrontation progresses, a limitation of the ability to act becomes apparent: the possibility of actively defending oneself against anti-Semitism is highly dependent on the context. Factors such as the behaviour of bystanders, the immediacy of the interaction, the degree of anonymity in the interaction, and power relations between those involved play a decisive role.

### Online survey on the prevalence of experiences with political-Islamist antisemitism

Approximately 29% of respondents reported having experienced 'Islamic' antisemitism within the last 10 years. In contrast, approximately 39% of respondents reported experiencing exclusively non-Islamic antisemitism and 33% reported no antisemitism at all. Breaking down incidents by type (threat/insult, vandalism, physical violence) uncovers distinct patterns. Among those respondents who had experienced antisemitic threats and insults (67.5%), 38% stated that the driving force behind these acts was rooted in Islam. A right-wing motive was suspected in 24% of cases, a left-wing motive in 6%, and a Christian motive in 2%. In cases of antisemitic property damage or vandalism, those affected believe that an Islamic motive was present in 37% of incidents, with a right-wing motive suspected in 37% of cases as well. In cases of physical attacks, 57% of those affected report that these acts were Islamically motivated, compared to 17% who suspected a right-wing motive.

The attribution of an Islamic motive is based on several factors: 77.4% of respondents name the remarks made by the perpetrators as the decisive criterion, 61.9% refer to the language they spoke, and 57.1% to their physical appearance. Contextual factors such as location (e.g. at pro-Palestinian demonstrations) and timing (e.g. escalations of the Middle East conflict) play a less significant role.

The results of the experiment show that respondents on each of the three levels perceive radical Muslims as significantly more threatening or problematic than 'Muslims' in general. In addition, the threat perception decreases with increasing proximity to one's personal life. While 30% attribute a high level of threat to 'Muslims' in general, the figure rises to 66% for 'radical Muslims'. The difference is even more pronounced in the personal threat perception, which is less pronounced overall: 6.5% of respondents say they are afraid of 'Muslims', while 46% say they are afraid of 'radical Muslims' ('agree completely' responses).

Respondents thus clearly distinguish between 'Muslims' and 'radical Muslims' in terms of their problem and threat perceptions in relation to PIA, especially when it comes to their personal sense of threat, which This, in turn, is generally less pronounced than the general problem perception and the general threat perception.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study shows that antisemitism is an everyday threat for Jews, one that can arise unexpectedly, and which quickly demands practical action, with the reactions of bystanders being crucial to maintaining one's ability to act. Regarding political-Islamist antisemitism specifically, it appears that perpetrators are identified primarily by characteristics perceived as Islamic— with perceived radicalism being the principal marker for feeling threatened.

Since it has not been conclusively clarified whether the acts that cause the perceived threat are actually committed by ideologically motivated perpetrators, further mixed-method studies are recommended to explore the understanding of the term 'political Islam' among Jews.

Civic education should prioritise Jewish perspectives on antisemitism. Specifically, it should be highlighted that Jews view antisemitism as a societal issue arising from multiple sources, with radicalised Islamist antisemitism as a key component of this threat. If the wider public likewise regards antisemitism as a practical concern for all, it will facilitate meaningful support for those being confronted with it daily. ■

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# Chapter 6: Between Distrust and the Hope for Recognition: Interactions in the Relations Between the State, Society, and Muslims

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## 1. Background

The research project "Interactions of Islamist Radicalisation in Social and Political Contexts" (WECHSELWIRKUNGEN) was grounded in the conviction that radicalisation and radicalism emerge from a web of interacting, mutually influencing forces. In short, from a network of reciprocal relationships that shape the complex, dynamic entity called "society."

To move beyond approaches that examine only one side of radicalisation processes, the project placed the Muslim perspective at its centre. It asked: What effects do legislative measures or administrative actions taken in the name of counterterrorism have on fundamental and human rights? How do media discourses and societal discrimination influence the attitudes of Muslims? How do Muslims perceive state interventions and political discourse in specific areas, such as Islamic Religious Education? How do they navigate confrontations with "critics of Islam" in urban settings? How do they negotiate forms of (devout) Islamic life in Germany, whether in Facebook groups or through ritual sermons?

The aim was to identify potential sources and contributing factors that might nourish the often-diffuse grounds for radicalisation among Muslims, while also seeking to understand factors that foster Muslim resilience against radicalisation. This contribution examines various facets of these interdependencies—between Muslims and Muslim organisations and both state and civil society actors—across different fields of practice and discourse, and at varying levels.

## 2. Methodology

The study was multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary, with research sites located in both western and eastern Germany. Data sources were diverse: legal texts and court rulings, Facebook discussions, sermons, participant observation, individual and group interviews, facilitated role-playing exercises, online-experiments, and meta-analyses of survey data within a mixed-methods design. The analysis covered national, European, and international levels, as well as individual perspectives and collective attitudes.

To assess whether and to what extent preventive counter-terrorism measures cast a wide net, impacting not only terror suspects but the fundamental and human rights of Muslims in general, the project examined both national and international dimensions, focusing particularly on EU and UN sanctions. The legal analysis encompassed relevant German and European legislation, UN Security Council resolutions, and key rulings of German administrative courts, the Federal Constitutional Court, the European Court of Human Rights, and the Court of Justice of the European Union.

An online experiment with 135 participants explored how discrimination influences political trust. Specifically, whether information about discrimination against Muslim women in the labour market spills over and affects Muslims' trust in political institutions. To contextualise and differentiate the experimental findings, seven focus-group discussions were conducted in two waves (October 2021–June 2022 and late January 2024). Each group comprised three to seven people who, in everyday life, are perceived as Muslim to varying degrees. In addition, a systematic *scoping review* mapped the current state of research on how discrimination shapes civic engagement intentions among people with a migration background, including Muslims.

The experiences of the "Muslim community" during the institutionalisation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE)—from conceptual design to classroom implementation—were explored through narrative, semi-structured interviews. Between October 2020 and September 2024, the research team conducted 67 group interviews (with teachers and parents) and 26 individual interviews (with parents) involving association and institutional representatives, teachers who deliver IRE, and parents whose children are or were enrolled in the classes.

The study also examined confrontations in urban settings between Muslims and self-declared "critics of Islam" and how various state and civil-society institutions moderated these encounters. Researchers analysed discourse and documents, such as flyers advertising dialogue events, observed mediation formats, and conducted 63 qualitative interviews with scholars, national and local experts, practicing moderators, and Muslims from diverse groups in two western and two eastern German cities.

A separate investigation focused on Facebook discussions among Muslim women. It explored how everyday religious norms are negotiated, how these debates interact with current events and public controversies, and whether group members distance themselves from potential, even subtle, Islamist influence. For this purpose, 1,550 discussion threads from 2021 were analysed, involving Muslim women in German-language Facebook groups who were not radicalised and had no affiliation with extremist circles.

Finally, publicly available sermons from the two largest Turkish-origin associations—the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB) and the Islamic Community *Millî Görüş* (IGMG)—were collected and their socio-political themes analysed. The corpus contains more than 730 DITIB sermons from 2011 to 2024 and over 1,000 IGMG sermons from 2003 to 2024.

## 3. Key Findings

The analyses show that Muslims experience discrimination more often than other groups. The distrust they sense from politics, the media, and the broader public is mirrored by their own scepticism and, in some areas, outright distrust. Even so, most Muslims still place considerable trust in the state and its institutions, and Muslim associations strongly encourage them to play an active role in society. In return, Muslims hope for acceptance and recognition—both as individuals and for their organisations and the services they provide—and expect discrimination to decline over time.

### Effects on fundamental and human rights of counter-terrorism measures

National counterterrorism measures often also affect the human rights of non-radicalised Muslims. Terrorism laws increasingly interfere with fundamental rights, especially for non-German citizens. Although intended to curb radicalisation, these measures can produce unintended social side effects, such as a rise in discriminatory experiences. At the European and international levels, sanctions sometimes reach beyond their direct targets to include family members, civil society groups and humanitarian actors.

### Discrimination, coping strategies, and political attitudes among Muslims

Discrimination, whether subjectively perceived or objectively experienced, is a painful part of everyday life for Muslims in Germany, leaving lasting scars. These scars are not only emotional in nature but are also reflected in the (political) attitudes and diverse behaviours of Muslims. It has been shown that perceptions of group-based discrimination have a particular impact on attitudes, and that personal discrimination leads to stronger coping strategies at the behavioural level.

The online experiment shows that Muslims' trust in the police declines after they read about workplace discrimination against Muslim women who wear headscarf. Their trust in other political institutions, such as the federal government, the courts, political parties, and individual politicians, remains unchanged. The study also found that Muslims with a strong sense of Muslim identity are more likely to perceive discrimination against their group as personally relevant. For these individuals, exposure to information about labour market

discrimination against Muslim women leads not only to reduced trust in the police but also to lower levels of trust in the German Bundestag.

In the group discussions, participants felt that political institutions and actors could protect Muslims from discrimination yet seemed unwilling to do so. They also viewed the state itself as a potential source of discrimination through policies, bureaucratic practices, and individual officials. Even so, many participants expressed a strong wish to contribute to social cohesion in Germany and were confident that their negative experiences would diminish over time.

The analysis further confirmed that people who face discrimination adopt a wide range of coping strategies. In total, twenty such strategies were identified, including the use of humour.

### Islamic Religious Education (IRE): between acceptance and refusal, trust and scepticism

The interviewed parents voiced both acceptance and reservations about school-based Islamic Religious Education (IRE). They welcomed the curriculum, noting that it translates Islamic teachings consistently into a school setting and unites the diverse cultural backgrounds of Muslim students in one school subject. A sound grasp of Islam, they argued, can be conveyed only by including students from different theological and legal traditions and by linking lessons to their varied lived experiences. These differences allow children to gain deeper knowledge and broaden their horizons.

Apart from valuing IRE as a subject, the interviewed parents highlight the role and relevance of Muslim teachers. They emphasize the importance of sound knowledge and an authentic delivery of the curriculum. Teaching methods are considered equally integral for enabling subject-oriented learning.

Questions about how the state cooperates with Muslim associations in organizing IRE and certifying teachers were another focus. Several interviewees criticised a lack of transparency in political decision-making and called for more open communication. Structural rules must reflect the interests of parents and children. Excessive influence of Muslim organisations or disproportionate state intervention could undermine the subject's neutrality and independence. Many parents are wary of one-sided state control, which they fear would hinder mutual transparency and erode trust. These findings underline the interplay between state and Muslim actors: transparent state action and trust in government are decisive for Muslim acceptance of IRE.

### Coping with confrontations with "Critics of Islam" in urban settings

In all four cities studied, instances of confrontation and growing societal polarisation were observed. These developments can act as triggers or reinforcing factors in radicalisation processes. The polarisation between socially constructed groups, such as "Germans" versus "Muslims," with religion functioning as the primary attribution marker, has gradually increased in recent years, particularly in cities in eastern Germany (cf. Pickel and Pickel 2023, p. 2, with further references). The interviews reveal a range of radicalisation factors. These include experiences of discrimination and defamation, reciprocal perceptions and stereotypes, as well as recurring patterns of motivation and frustration. Acts of violence against Muslims, such as the 2020 terrorist attack in Hanau or the 2009 murder of Marwa El-Sherbini in Dresden, both of which remain deeply present in the collective memory of Muslim communities, carry particularly high potential for polarisation and escalation within the immediate social environment. Additional sources of motivation and frustration are linked to specific conflicts, for example PEGIDA demonstrations *[translator's note: protests organised by the far-right movement PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident), which emerged in Germany in 2014]*, mosque construction projects in Erfurt and Dresden, or attacks on mosques. Similar effects arise from experiences with local or regional authorities, including immigration offices or the police.

The findings clearly indicate that measures for radicalisation and Islamism prevention generate considerable unease and mistrust among Muslims in West German cities. There is a widespread perception among them that Muslims are placed under general suspicion, as many traditional association activities, social and educational projects, and, for example, youth and dialogue work, are only supported or funded on the premise of Islamism prevention.

In the context of criticism of Islam, a spiral of critique or reciprocal defensive attitudes can be observed, which may have radicalisation-promoting effects. Sweeping criticism leads to Muslim apologetics, defensive reactions, and countercriticism, which in turn provoke intensified and undifferentiated criticism of Islam.

### Negotiating religious norms in Muslim women's Facebook groups

Private Facebook groups for Muslim women are not breeding grounds for radicalisation. They mainly serve as safe spaces to discuss everyday challenges and the practical application of Islamic norms.

Posts that convey low-threshold extremist messages tend to adopt a dogmatic stance, ignoring or dismissing the non-Muslim environment. Political, economic, legal, or cultural conditions were subordinated to the fulfilment of religious obligations or rejected as un-Islamic, expressing a rigid and otherworldly-oriented understanding of Islam. Criticism was met with little interest in receiving new information or engaging with alternative interpretations of Islamic norms. Negative effects on social relationships were accepted if the person addressed did not show openness to the extremist content. In many cases, this led to a noticeable change in tone, cooling markedly after an initially very friendly and inclusive approach.

The responses of the Muslim women to such low-threshold extremist messages were characterised by a deliberately attentive and respectful tone, which persisted even in cases of disagreement. In order to counter dogmatic attitudes, a pragmatic approach to Islamic norms was presented, with potential solutions and courses of action that were highly practical and results-oriented. Another notable finding is the women's concern with reconciling religious duties and German law—for instance, the enforceability of Islamic marriage contracts after divorce or the freedom to practice religion at work. References to major Islamic scholars and sources are essential for backing arguments and legitimising solutions, yet there is considerable uncertainty about German laws.

In their discussions, the women also addressed broader societal discourses and emphasised that they perceived the increasing social polarisation and Islamophobia in Germany as unjust and threatening. Responses ranged from political disillusionment and calls for activism to more extreme political cynicism and conspiracy narratives. Many recounted discriminatory incidents, often attributing them to ignorance about Islam or the needs of Muslim women.

### Themes and messages in "mainstream" sermons in Germany

The average mosque-goer in Germany is not exposed to hate preaching. Instead, Friday sermons offer guidance for a morally grounded everyday life. They primarily focus on three core religious topics: Islamic theology or creed (*ʿaqīda*), practical law (*sharīʿa*), and moral or character education (*akhlāq*). Many sermons also cover interpersonal relations, parenting and education, virtues, and spirituality. Although less common than religious themes, sermons by the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB) and the Islamic Community Millî Görüş (IGMG) do address social and political issues such as war and peace, terrorism and extremism, homeland, integration, migration and participation, society, racism, discrimination, and Islamophobia.

With regards to subjects such as (1) racism, discrimination, and hostility toward Islam or Muslims, and (2) Islamist extremism, radicalism, and terrorism, the findings are clear. Muslim associations openly acknowledge the negative experiences Muslims face, interpret them through a religious lens, and urge a constructive, peaceful response. They see extremism as a grave problem, both for themselves and for German society. Sermons consistently reject extremes and violence and promote a "community of the middle," that is, moderation. They strongly encourage law-abiding behaviour and active social engagement, not only for fellow Muslims but for society as a whole.

The preventive potential of these sermons is limited, however, because Turkish remains the dominant language in many mosques. As a result, part of the younger congregation and non-Turkish Muslims who lack sufficient Turkish language skills are not fully reached.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Muslims are woven into a dense web of interactions to which they themselves contribute. These interactions are shaped by factors like discrimination and stigmatisation, scepticism and distrust, longing for acceptance and appreciation, but also trust in the state and its institutions.

Central to this experience is the emotional climate in which Muslims find themselves. The distrust they sense from politics, the media, and society is mirrored by their own scepticism and, in some areas, outright distrust.

In the short term, discrimination lowers Muslims' trust in certain state institutions. Even so, there remains strong overall trust in the state and its bodies and—crucially—the willingness, actively encouraged by Muslim associations, of many Muslims to participate fully in society. In return, Muslims hope for acceptance and recognition, both as individuals and for their associations and organisations and the services they provide. They expect that, in this way, discrimination will diminish over time or even disappear altogether.

### Recommendations for policymakers

Muslim experiences, sentiments, and concerns must be acknowledged and taken seriously rather than brushed aside. After more than sixty years of visible Muslim presence in Germany, Muslim associations should finally receive legal recognition as partners of the state and its bodies under Germany's constitutional law on religion. This would transparently integrate the associations—with rights and duties—into mixed-responsibility areas such as Islamic Religious Education and make genuine participation possible. Trust and identification with the state, its institutions, and society as a whole would surely grow. A fundamental change in public language and rhetoric about Muslims and Islam is also essential. Constant denigration, stigmatizing labels and sweeping generalisations—along with the growing linkage to security and migration narratives by politicians or state officials—nurture the soil in which radicalisation can take root. This responsibility is also shared by the media.

### Recommendations for mosque communities

Muslim associations and congregations should greatly expand their German-language services, especially for children and young people. German-speaking *Imams* and religious education teachers familiar with local life are indispensable. Cooperation with schools and association-based youth work creates meeting spaces and encourages professionalisation. Protected neighbourhood venues (such as women's cafés) and legal advisory services appear suitable as primary prevention measures: they can counteract the social deprivation of Muslim women, address low-threshold extremist outreach and strengthen attachment to Germany's rule-of-law system.

### Recommendations for society at large

Awareness-raising and educational initiatives can reduce experiences of discrimination, which foster radicalisation and can also play a harmful role in co-radicalisation processes. The non-Muslim majority should be provided with sound knowledge about Islam to dispel prejudice. Medical, educational, and social work professionals should be sensitised to the particular needs of Muslim women so that conflict situations do not arise in the first place. ■

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# Chapter 7: Salafist Discourses of Outbidding in Germany's Islamic Field: Sociological Discourse Analysis and Practical Recommendations

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## 1. Background

Over the past decade, social science research on Salafism as a 'phenomenon of radicalisation' (Zick 2017) in Germany has gained momentum. While interest in discussing historical developments and theological concepts initially dominated the research agenda, the focus gradually shifted to investigating local manifestations of Salafism. Both strands of research examine core elements of Salafist ideology, organisational structures, and mobilisation strategies, and both propose corresponding prevention concepts. However, internal rivalries—both among Salafist factions and between Salafists and other Muslim actors—have so far received little attention. On the Salafist side, such contests are marked by aggressive, polemical tactics intended to outdo their opponents at any cost, legitimate or otherwise. This, it is argued, not only constitutes the potential for conflict inherent in Salafist competitive strategies but also accounts for their tendency towards religious radicalisation.

The research question is therefore: How and under what conditions do Salafist 'outbidding' discourses spark conflicts that drive religious radicalisation?

To answer this question, a total of six Salafist debates between 1990 and 2024 were examined in two different contexts (Morocco and Germany). This contribution summarises the results of an analysis of a Salafist debate in Germany that took place between 2013 and 2015, referred to here as the modernism debate. This debate consisted of one-sided attacks by Salafists on reformist theological approaches in the wake of the academic institutionalisation of Islamic theology at German universities. Starting in 2013, Salafist preacher Pierre Vogel took a strongly negative and polemical stance against the Centre for Islamic Theology at the University of Muenster. In his description of the problem, he exploits the already heated dispute between Islamic associations and the Centre for Islamic Theology to proclaim his position as the true and correct one before his followers.

## 2. Methodology

A sociological discourse analysis methodology (c.f. Keller 2011) was chosen to analyse religious knowledge content and concepts of Islam as well as their contested interpretation by collective or individual actors in public social debates. The data corpus comprises 55 YouTube videos, which were repeatedly viewed and arranged in chronological order. For in-depth analysis, 19 of these videos (totalling 808 minutes) were fully transcribed, coded, and prepared for detailed evaluation.

## 3. Key Findings

In conceptual terms, religious outbidding strategies represent special forms of rivalry that usually arise in conflict situations and unfold without regard for institutionalised religious rules. They have a compensatory function that is primarily utilised by non-institutional actors (in this case, activist Salafists) to compensate for their own deficit in institutionalised religious capital. They have a compensatory effect because they temporarily grant Salafist actors ‚religious power' in the eyes of their followers and make them appear equal to institutional actors in Islam.

At the discourse analysis level, two key findings can be highlighted. First, Salafist outbidding discourses can be understood as attacks on official religious reform and institutionalisation processes in the Islamic field. From this perspective, institutional reform approaches appear as a distortion of Islam that must be fought by all means. The content of the Salafist outbidding strategy consists of religious-theological self-empowerment

(self-authorisation) to act in the name of Islam and Muslims and to present oneself vis-à-vis the official theological institutions as the "true" and "authentic" proclaimers and saviours of the message of Islam in the face of its loss.

Secondly, outbidding strategies are closely tied to feelings of loss such as fear, betrayal, bitterness, hatred, and anger. Salafist outbidding discourses predominantly deal with perceptions of loss of a particular version of Islam, which they consider to be the true version that must be revived. They can therefore be described as discourses of loss that are driven and, under certain conditions, made more aggressive by feelings of loss. Loss and salvation are therefore key interpretative patterns that underpin the persistence of Salafist outbidding attacks. This strategy may also explain the appeal of Salafist rhetoric to young people who are searching for religious meaning and identity and cannot find it in established mosques or can only find it in a language they no longer understand. The findings discussed here aim to draw attention to this intertwining of strong negative feelings of loss and outbidding discourses and to understand this intertwining as a key driving force behind Salafist radicalisation, which is triggered by the meticulous work of certain 'preachers of loss' and maintained over long periods of time.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Religious outbidding strategies are not self-evident; they must be interpreted within their respective context. As a factor in radicalisation, they are therefore underestimated or not recognised at all. Describing them in their context and reconstructing how they function can help to develop preventive counterstrategies that counteract potential radicalisation at an early stage.

### Intensify the religious institutionalisation processes of Islam in Germany and strengthen academic Islamic theology

Religious institutionalisation processes (in terms of religious policy, law, education policy, etc.) lead to distancing and negative reinterpretations of developments that are positive for Muslims within Salafist-politicised milieus. This is followed by counteroffers in an outbidding mode, using such positive events as an opportunity to propagate their own version of Islam, which takes little account of the society in which it is practised and lived. Academic Islamic theology should research (external) counter-theologies and develop religious education tools to deconstruct them. This will strengthen the competence of prospective Islamic teachers in dealing with Salafist outbidding strategies.

### Train teachers and prevention specialists to recognise outbidding tactics

'Confrontational religious practice' (Kiefer 2021) can be understood as a form of religious outbidding. It is characterised by a strict understanding of religion that uses Islam to justify certain provocative statements or practices. Such religious practice can lead to conflicts in schools. However, whether this is the case depends crucially on whether teachers are able to determine the religious basis of a confrontational statement and isolate it from other factors of pubertal, personal, family, ethnic, or other nature (Nordbruch 2022; Schiffauer 2015). If such statements and practices are perceived by teachers as deliberate attempts of outbidding, they can be addressed in a timely and preventive manner, and measures can be taken to ensure that they do not recur.

### Investigate religious outbidding across multiple dimensions

The current focus on discursive forms of outbidding does not mean that they are only found in discourse. They also manifest themselves as emotional states, physical performances, audiovisual representations or organisational practices. Focusing solely on the discourses of religious outbidding proved to be an urgent task, as there have been no studies on this particular phenomenon to date and the other dimensions (affects, physical practices, audiovisual performances, organisational forms, etc.) (cf. Krech 2021) require different methodological approaches, especially ethnographic ones. In future, however, the phenomenon should be studied not only regarding discourse but also via its material, audiovisual, and public expressions.

### Sociological, theological, and comparative religious research on the phenomenon of religious outbidding

From a comparative perspective, research on Salafist outbidding could be given greater consideration as part of research on co-radicalisation processes. For example, reciprocal reinforcement mechanisms and processes of learning between different radicalised discourses of loss (radical Salafists versus right-wing extremists) could be investigated using qualitative reconstructive analysis methods (cf. Becker and Dennaoui 2025). The topic could also be explored further from a comparative perspective and developed into a sociologically substantial theory of religious outbidding practices. ■

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# Chapter 8: Spatial Perspectives on Susceptibility to Radicalisation: A Comparative Study

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## 1. Background

To date, academic literature lacks a systematic consideration of space as an explanatory factor for susceptibility to radicalisation. If location made no difference, Islamist radicalisation would be just as likely in Kabul as in Cologne, an assumption that appears implausible. In the German and broader European context, intra-urban differences are particularly significant and often more pronounced than differences between cities (El-Mafaalani et al. 2015). It makes a considerable difference whether or not individuals navigate their daily lives under conditions of concentrated poverty, urban planning deficiencies, and a social environment perceived as burdensome.

The advantage of adopting a spatial perspective lies in its ability to account for contextual factors embedded in individuals' everyday residential environments. It can be assumed that characteristics contributing to susceptibility to radicalisation are unevenly distributed across a city. However, the contextual effects of residential areas on radicalisation susceptibility have so far received little scholarly attention (Hüttermann, 2018; Kurtenbach et al., 2024). Demonstrating such contextual effects would offer valuable insights for prevention, particularly in addressing vulnerability to radicalisation, and could help mitigate additional disadvantages arising from spatial factors. Viewing radicalisation through a spatial lens thus presents a significant advancement both in understanding and in preventing radicalisation.

The research project "Radicalizing Spaces" (RadiRa) set out to discover whether, and to what extent, space affects an individual's susceptibility to radicalisation.

## 2. Methodology

The study was conducted as a comparative case study in three cities: Dortmund (Nordstadt district), Bonn (Neu-Tannenbusch district), and Berlin (in the northern part of Neukölln). All three neighbourhoods share a similarly disadvantaged socio-structural profile, characterised by high poverty rates and a large proportion of residents with migration backgrounds, predominantly from Muslim-majority countries. Preliminary research revealed differences in the nature of activity of the Islamist scene across these locations.

Three sub-studies were conducted at each of the three study locations:

Survey study (September–November 2022): A Germany-wide reference sample of 2,029 individuals was surveyed and compared with local samples from Dortmund (2,075 respondents), Bonn (2,006), and Berlin (2,062). Based on a prior pilot study (Kurtenbach et al., 2018), three risk factors were identified as indicators of susceptibility to radicalisation: (1) distrust in democracy, (2) authoritarianism, and (3) experiences of discrimination. The assumption was that the overlap of these factors would increase the likelihood of an individual becoming radicalised. Additional explanatory variables included self-control, exposure to political content online, satisfaction with income, legal cynicism, and interpersonal trust within the neighbourhood.

Interview study: In each district, ten expert interviews were conducted with social workers, along with interviews with ten residents who had participated in local social programs and ten who had not. These interviews focused on how the spatial context shaped everyday experiences and the role of local services in preventing radicalisation.

Ethnographic fieldwork (one year per district): Ethnographic research was carried out in each district to understand how Islamist groups interact with the local community. This included examining the role of the digital space in daily life and how events, particularly those related to the 2023/2024 Middle East conflict, manifested in local protests. The fieldwork began with public observations in everyday settings, complemented by informal ethnographic interviews conducted as casual conversations.

Through these observations and conversations, contacts were established with people in the field who, thanks to their local insider knowledge, were able to provide important information and further contacts. The observations were recorded in field notes, and later (combined) interviews were added. At the same time, field artifacts such as documents, pictures, etc. were included in the study. The field notes and interviews were evaluated using Grounded Theory.

## 3. Key Findings

### Survey study: Spatial patterns of susceptibility to radicalisation

The findings indicate that, across all study locations, higher levels of self-control, subjective income satisfaction, and interpersonal trust within one‘s neighbourhood are associated with lower susceptibility to radicalisation. In contrast, legal cynicism and having a migration background correlate with higher susceptibility to radicalisation—again, consistently across all sites. The association between interpersonal trust and susceptibility to radicalisation is less pronounced in the nationwide sample than in the urban samples, which may reflect the influence of local context and social dynamics in the specific cities studied.

Another notable difference between the nationwide and city-level surveys emerges in relation to digital practices. Specifically, the city-level data show a positive correlation between frequent online engagement with political and religious content and higher susceptibility to radicalisation. This association does not appear in the nationwide sample.

Religious affiliation with Islam is significantly associated with susceptibility to radicalisation only in Bonn and in the national sample. In Dortmund and Berlin, a negative correlation is observed, though it is not statistically significant. This suggests that respondents who identify as Muslim tend to report a lower susceptibility to radicalisation.

A statistically significant but very weak factor in Dortmund is the volume of residential mobility within the district. The data suggest that the higher the level of residential mobility, the lower the association with susceptibility to radicalisation. In Berlin, a slightly increased correlation is observed between the proportion of residents under the age of 18 living in a district and susceptibility to radicalisation. No statistically significant associations were found in the other study locations.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that individually reported factors play a dominant role in shaping susceptibility to radicalisation. In contrast, socio-structural characteristics of the residential environment appear to play a subordinate role.

### Interview study: local insights on susceptibility to radicalisation

An analysis of the interview findings with residents and professionals from the three neighbourhoods reveals that the individuals involved are aware of the contextual factors that can increase susceptibility to radicalisation. Preventive strategies adopted by residents may include peaceful coexistence, although these tend to focus primarily on the short-term avoidance of conflict and do not necessarily mitigate the underlying contextual effects.

In contrast, social control within the neighbourhood appears to have a preventive function, which can be interpreted as a learned response to previous instances of Islamist appropriation of space.

In this context, the local community assumes a protective role and can, to some extent, compensate for gaps in the available support structures. This suggests that the environment itself has the potential to reduce susceptibility to radicalisation. Such a role becomes particularly important in situations where service provision is incomplete, especially when responsibilities for neighbourhood-specific issues—and for radicalisation and its prevention—remain insufficiently defined.

### Local ethnography: Islamism as a fragment of everyday life

Changes within the scene in recent years initially led to a decline in public Islamist agitation. However, following the events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent reactions in Berlin and other parts of Germany, a renewed presence in public spaces has become increasingly visible. This is even the case for actors who were previously more active on social media. These individuals instrumentalise the conflict and the devastating situation in Gaza to mobilise supporters, spread anti-Israeli and antisemitic narratives, and simultaneously promote their own agendas, such as the call for a return to the caliphate and the reinforcement of (perceived) Muslim unity and identity.

At the same time, the research revealed that in all study locations there are institutions associated with legalistic Islam. Some of these groups have well-established structures. They maintain a presence in local spaces but do not actively promote themselves, nor do they seek to dominate these spaces. Rather, they integrate into the existing local structures and primarily operate through a "pull model", meaning that individuals must actively seek out and attend their facilities. These institutions convey a separatist, though not illegal, interpretation of Islam. Their offerings are strongly linked to questions of identity, presenting themselves as a solution to the perceived tension between "Islamic tradition" and "Western culture" in favour of an Islamic identity.

## 4. Conclusion and policy recommendations

Overall, the project demonstrates that space plays a significant role in shaping susceptibility to radicalisation. Individuals structure their daily lives within local environments, which exert a measurable influence on them. While these spatial contexts can present disadvantages, they also offer opportunities for preventive action.

Taking the findings of all three sub-studies together, a common thread emerges: individuals must navigate the everyday challenges posed by their neighbourhood environments. In doing so, they encounter both constraints and resources—and how they respond to these depends on their personal characteristics and resilience.

Where solidarity is lacking, social services are absent, and neighbourhood dynamics are burdensome, individuals may become more vulnerable to radicalisation. This is especially true for those who experience exclusion or feel that their perspectives and concerns are ignored in broader political debates. In such cases, it is critical not to cede the space to Islamist actors but instead to offer alternative narratives and support structures.

One promising approach to prevention is strengthening interpersonal relationships at the neighbourhood level. Moreover, effective prevention must consider both physical and digital spaces, avoid the stigmatisation of specific areas as so-called "hot spots", and reinforce local social services as an expression of municipal social policy. Building trust in public institutions and promoting social cohesion at the community level are equally vital.

Achieving this requires coordinated efforts among federal, state, and local governments, as well as partnerships between public institutions and civil society organisations. Municipal action plans—which remain rare but are emerging—offer an organisational framework for aligning state-level, community-based, and civil society efforts toward more holistic prevention strategies. ■

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# Chapter 9: Grievances, Ressentiment, and Radicalisation among the Muslim Population

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## 1. Background

Research on the roots of Islamism and radicalisation often highlights prejudice against Islam, cultural exclusion, social discrimination, segregation, and integration challenges (Pollack 2014, 2016; Pickel and Pickel 2019). However, the connection between emotional states and radicalisation have received far less attention. These emotional and affective states of Muslims (or migrants in general) were the focus of the project "Ressentiment as an Affective Basis for Radicalisation" (Ressentiment).

The project aimed to overcome the one-sided focus on the security policy aspects of radicalisation and took greater account of the cultural, religious, and social roots from which radical attitudes and actions arise. To this end, the project focused on the links between grievances (e.g. perceived discrimination, injustices, or humiliation), *ressentiment*, and radicalisation. *Ressentiment* refers to the consolidation of a sense of grievance that places negative social experiences at the centre while devaluing positive ones. As an interplay between (1) pronounced feelings of grievance and (2) strong enemy images, combined with (3) a low willingness to learn and (4) a low capacity for criticism and reflection, such consolidated feelings can contribute to negative attitudes towards one's social environment in the long term and facilitate radicalisation processes.

The project investigated the significance of affective states of *ressentiment* for radicalisation and how they relate to feelings of grievance, collective attributions, perceptual patterns, and experiences of humiliation. *Ressentiment* was examined from various perspectives: its manifestations were investigated, as were the social and individual conditions that favour its development. The focus was on the role of such emotional states in a radicalisation process, as well as on the prevalence of *ressentiment* among Muslims. Another question was to what extent the development of *ressentiments* and their effects among Muslims occur in relation to Islam.

## 2. Methodology

The project combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Between July 2023 and April 2024, a quantitative survey was conducted among Muslims with a migrant background. In total, 1,887 participants were surveyed on the four factors of *ressentiment*: (1) collective feelings of grievance, (2) enemy images (anti-Western, antisemitic, anti-assimilated Muslims), (3) collective willingness to learn, and (4) collective capacity for criticism and reflection.

Between October 2021 and May 2024, 81 interviews were conducted with a total of 131 participants, including 50 individual interviews and 26 group interviews. The participants were mostly of Turkish origin, with a small proportion of people of Arab origin. The topics explored included social participation, perceptions of Islam in Germany, experiences of discrimination, identity, and relationships with Germans.

In a further 23 qualitative interviews, some with imprisoned radicalised individuals with a Muslim background and some with individuals who had disengaged from radicalisation, the focus was on the role of *ressentiments* and religion in prevention and deradicalisation work.

In order to examine and differentiate the connection of *ressentiment* and grievances with radicalisation, and to explore how Muslims process perceived experiences of humiliation and which role their faith plays in this, 17 people with a Muslim, predominantly Arab, migration background were interviewed. A heterogeneous sample was compiled based on the criteria of gender, age, origin, and education. Islamic faith was used as an independent variable, as it plays a significant role in the construction of one's identity and, depending on how it is understood, can lead to different ways of dealing with grievances (dependent variable).

In addition, a qualitative text analysis was carried out to analyse how Islamist actors instrumentalize (perceived) grievances and injustices to construct narratives of victimhood and address people with *ressentiment* in order to mobilise them against German society. For this purpose, YouTube videos created by the Islamist preacher Abul Baraa were analysed to determine the extent to which a connection between extremism and *ressentiment* can be detected in his videos.

## 3. Key Findings

### *Ressentiment* and radicalisation from a quantitative perspective

The four dimensions of *ressentiment* can be found among respondents to varying degrees and in different combinations. Twenty percent of the sample exhibit high levels of grievance and strong enemy images, combined with lower willingness to learn and lower capacity for criticism and reflection. In contrast, 29% of respondents display a *ressentiment*-free profile: low levels of feelings of grievance and weak enemy images alongside high willingness to learn and strong critical reflection. The remaining 51.2% score either average or low on the four variables.

The results on the relationship between *ressentiment* and sociodemographic factors, social structure, integration, religion, and preliminary analyses of the relationship with radicalisation reveal some significant differences between the *ressentiment* group and the *ressentiment*-free group:

The *ressentiment* group is significantly younger, is more frequently part of the second and third migrant generation, has a lower likelihood of higher education, and earns on average less than the *ressentiment*-free group. Muslims in the *ressentiment* group rate their German language skills higher than those in the *ressentiment*-free group but are less well integrated emotionally (attachment to Germany) and socially (contacts with non-Muslims). They also show a lower willingness to integrate and are more likely to agree with the statement that Muslims should not integrate into non-Muslim societies. Differences can also be found in various indicators of religiosity: Muslims in the *ressentiment* group show significantly higher subjective religiosity and attend the mosque more often than Muslims in the *ressentiment*-free group. In addition, the *ressentiment* group is more orthodox-religious and fundamentalist than the group without *ressentiment*.

The biggest differences can be observed in radicalisation. With regard to non-violent radicalisation (Abay Gaspar et al. 2019), more than half of participants in the *ressentiment* group agree with statements related to Islamism (Islam as the ultimate political authority, support for Sharia law). About one-third would participate in unauthorised demonstrations in support of Muslim rights. Approval of these three statements ranges between 2% and 8% in the *ressentiment*-free group. With regard to violent radicalisation, one third of the *ressentiment* group accepts reactive violence, 16% regard the Qur‘an as a basis for legitimising violence, and 11% say they would use violence themselves to defend Muslim interests. In the group without *ressentiment*, the levels of agreement are again significantly lower (between 0 and 5%).

First follow-up analyses show that *ressentiment* is an independent and highly significant predictor of radicalisation with and without violence. This remains the case even when considering a variety of other independent variables, such as social structure, integration, perceptions of disadvantage, and religiosity.

### *Ressentiment* as an affective state

Grievances alone are not enough to give rise to *ressentiment*. This is because the negative affects and states associated with it (hatred, anger, envy and powerlessness in the face of inferiority, experiences of violence, and injuries) can be processed and repaired in social and institutional conflicts and discourses.

*Ressentiment* takes hold when people feel unable to respond to an offense, leaving them powerless and searching for someone to blame. Blame is then attributed to an evil and abstract perpetrator or an abstract and evil system. Therefore, *ressentiment* does not help to process actual or perceived hurt and unfair treatment but rather causes it to be re-experienced over and over again.

### The role of grand narratives in the (de)radicalisation process

The interviews with radicalised individuals, regardless of their age, show that a fundamental distinction must be made between factors that promote radicalisation processes and radicalisation narratives. The term narrative, or more specifically grand narrative, reflects the fact that these are not religious or political arguments, real facts, or rationally comprehensible discourses. Instead, they are highly emotionally charged narratives that shape the self-image and worldview and thus create identity.

All radicalised interviewees share a strong anti-Western grand narrative that refers to injustices committed by the West against Muslims worldwide and which is presented as the reason for their own radical attitude. Some talk about experiences of discrimination against Muslims in European societies, but as an abstract phenomenon rather than their own lived experience. This grand narrative is shared by violent individuals and those who support Islamism but reject violence. Why people who express the same negative grand narratives do not all become radicalised and resort to violence can only be answered on an individual basis. An examination of the biographies of imprisoned radicalised individuals points to socio-psychological factors.

### The role of faith in dealing with grievances

Muslim faith helped the majority of the participants to strengthen their resilience, create a sense of community, and protect themselves from *ressentiment* or even radicalisation. For although the interviewees reported experiences of humiliation, many of them developed alternative ways of dealing with them aside from *ressentiment* or radicalisation, explicitly referring to their Muslim faith.

The decisive factor in processing experiences of humiliation and in shaping an individual‘s position in society is the interpretation of Islam offered to believers or the interpretation they choose to follow. This determines how those affected view and process their experiences of humiliation in society based on their faith. Fundamentalist interpretations reinforce affective states of *ressentiment*. When it comes to *ressentiment* and its relationship to radicalism, it is also important to distinguish that not every radical feels *ressentiment*. And not every person with *ressentiment* will drift into radicalisation or even become an extremist. Nevertheless, the results show that religious narratives can act as bridges from *ressentiment* to radicalisation.

### Ressentiment in Islamists’ appeals

Analysis of the YouTube videos reveals that narratives combining *ressentiment* with Islamist themes effectively resonate with viewers who harbour feelings of *ressentiment* and can spur them toward radical action. It is primarily the narrative of victimhood that is used for self-empowerment and in which negative experiences are interpreted as tests of faith. Islamists such as Abul Baraa confirm the feeling of exclusion (experience of humiliation) that they dignify and endow with meaning by claiming to be chosen by God as ‘true Muslims’. Abul Baraa thus utilises faith to defend a community he casts as oppressed, cultivating a profound sense of otherness. The majority society is held responsible for experiences of humiliation across the board. Extremists like Abul Baraa are therefore interested in creating or exploiting *ressentiment*, because it helps them to drive wedges into the community and radicalise people with *ressentiment*.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

*Ressentiment* seems to be characterised by tension between strong feelings of grievance and powerful enemy images, combined with a low level of collective willingness to learn and the ability to reflect. This combination is evident in at least one fifth of the Muslims questioned. However, the project shows that feelings of grievance do not necessarily lead to a consolidated state of *ressentiment* and that *ressentiment* is not always a breeding ground for radicalisation. Certain forms of religiosity can play an important role as a bridge, both on the path to radicalisation and on alternative paths.

A central factor contributing to radicalisation are grand narratives shaped by Islam that give radicalisation tendencies a meaning that can be appropriated individually. It also becomes clear that counter-narratives alone are not enough to disrupt radicalisation narratives. Achieving this requires either positive experiences that are

incompatible with the radicalisation narrative, or counter-narratives that those affected can identify with as part of their self-image and worldview. Prevention work must therefore seek to establish and generate grand narratives that serve as counter-narratives to radicalisation.

Grand narratives of a 'West that hates Islam' are most effectively challenged by highlighting positive Western contributions to Islam and Muslim communities. This could be achieved through targeted measures in education, youth work, the media, but also in personal and collective communication on an emotional level. Spaces for positive experiences are also crucial, not only to counteract the negative anti-Western grand narrative, but also to preventively establish a positive worldview of the West/the mainstream society. A positive grand narrative about Islam and Muslims themselves (Muslims as enriching members of society), rather than just about 'the West' and the mainstream society is also part of the desirable solution. This is a task for society as a whole, for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It is not only educational institutions and mosque congregations that need to act, but also the media and politicians.

Finally, a major challenge for prevention work is that discrimination and disadvantage faced by Muslims must be discussed in a balanced way, without stigmatising the non-Muslim part of society as moral perpetrators and Muslims as victims. Inflationary use of the term discrimination runs the risk of reinforcing the radicalisation narrative. In this regard, academia is also obliged to engage more with the criteria of anti-Muslim racism. ■

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# Chapter 10: "German Islam" between Anti-Muslim Racism and "Islamism"? On the Co-Production of a Controversial Concept

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## 1. Background

Islamism presents a major challenge not only for Germany's non-Muslim majority, but also for Muslim communities themselves. For some time now, it has been argued that Islamist actors deliberately seek to delegitimise Muslim communities by accusing them of betrayal and condemning alternative lifestyles as un-Islamic. At the same time, an ethnonationalist narrative has gained ground in some Muslim communities—one that promotes supposedly authentic cultural values through nostalgic narratives about the glorious history of Muslims. Against this backdrop, Markus Kerber, former State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of the Interior, presented a vision of a "German Islam" at the 2018 German Islam Conference. This vision was intended to be shaped and carried forward by Muslims living in Germany. The proposal sparked controversy: while some saw it as an opportunity to develop a locally rooted and adaptive version of Islam, others rejected the idea on the grounds that Islam is a universal religion that cannot be nationalised.

The project "German Islam as an Alternative to Islamism?" (D:Islam) examined whether a concept of "German Islam" has emerged organically within communities, associations, and civil society, outside of normative or political directives. It also explored how this concept has taken shape in the contested space between anti-Muslim racism and Islamist extremism.

The project was structured around three thematic areas:

(1) Islamist phishing strategies: This section examined how Islamist actors attempt to recruit members from Muslim communities online.

(2) Community defence: This part focused on how Muslim communities, particularly women's organisations, respond to Islamist attempts at influence and infiltration.

(3) German Islam: Finally, insights from the previous two areas were synthesised to explore whether a coherent concept of "German Islam" can be empirically substantiated and theoretically developed.

## 2. Methodology

The project employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. To investigate Islamist phishing strategies and mechanisms of digital radicalisation, the researchers analysed 3,000 TikTok videos created by Muslim content creators. The study compared the narrative strategies used by extremist and counter-extremist accounts, with a focus on how these accounts attempt to persuade users through storytelling (Ali et al. 2023).

Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with six Muslim women's organisations to understand their experiences with anti-Muslim racism as well as religiously motivated extremism. The interviews explored self-perceptions, threat perceptions, and defence strategies. Conducted between June and December 2022, both in person and online, the interviews were analysed using the Grounded Theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1998).

Finally, the project examined the societal negotiation of a “German Islam” was examined as a response to revisionist and essentialist-particularist Islamist approaches. The analysis considered how Muslim communities position themselves between anti-Muslim racism and Islamist influence, and the forms of hybrid identity that result from this process.

## 3. Key Findings

### Islamist phishing strategies in the digital realm

Islamist actors are deliberately using social media platforms, especially TikTok, to recruit young Muslims. They rely on algorithm-driven amplification through personalised content that targets feelings of insecurity and social exclusion. These narratives promote a simplified, hybrid understanding of Islam—one that blends religion, masculinity, pop culture, and strength (Ceylan & Jokisch, 2014). Moreover, it becomes evident that Islamist online strategies are not primarily aimed at individuals susceptible to radicalisation, but rather at those who are already radicalised, with the goal of further reinforcing their ideological convictions. These strategies rely on exclusive knowledge and specific ideological presuppositions that often go unrecognised by external observers (Ali et al., 2023).

### Community defence: strategies of Muslim women’s organisations

Muslim women’s organisations are significantly affected by anti-Muslim racism. This manifests on a discursive level through subtle or overt expressions of prejudice, mistrust, generalised suspicion, as well as defamation and slander. On a material level, these organisations experience exclusion from working groups and the rejection of (funding) applications (El Sayed, 2023). Interview participants emphasised that Muslim women, as representatives of their organisations, are not perceived as equal counterparts and are often denied the capacity for objective judgment (ibid.).

While Islamist influence was perceived as a less immediate threat, some organisations reported attempts by Islamist actors to discredit or instrumentalise their work. Organisations that take a strong political and media stance appear to be particularly affected. Strategies for dealing with Islamist actors include direct confrontation, refusal to engage, deletion of social media posts, and awareness-raising efforts targeting communities and vulnerable groups. The processes of boundary-setting vis-à-vis religious extremists tend to reinforce existing distinctions—though these boundaries are not drawn along lines of gender, religion, or race, but rather along political positioning. This mode of demarcation can be interpreted as indicative of a post-migrant self-understanding, in which boundaries are shaped less by social identity categories and more by political orientation.

### “German Islam” as a site of contestation

The project findings reveal that the development of a “German Islam” is significantly shaped by broader societal conflicts. It emerges within a bipolar tension between anti-Muslim racism and Islamist extremism. Both poles work against the negotiation of an adaptive, pluralistic model of Islam in Germany. While Islamist actors propagate a narrative of a “betrayed Islam,” anti-Muslim voices evoke the idea of a “foreign Islam” to justify exclusionary discourse.

Technological transformations, particularly algorithmically enhanced radicalisation strategies, play a critical role here. Studies have shown that recommendation algorithms on platforms like TikTok can amplify radical content (Weimann, 2016). In this context, digital Islamic advocacy represents a vital counterweight—one that supports hybrid, open-ended processes of identity negotiation.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study demonstrates that the future of a “German Islam” is largely shaped by ongoing societal negotiation processes. While both Islamist and anti-Muslim currents seek to obstruct the development of a pluralistic model of Islam in Germany, Muslim communities are actively engaged in shaping alternative models of

identity. The digital sphere plays an increasingly significant role in this context, functioning both as a space for radicalisation and as a platform for innovative forms of Islamic advocacy. In the long term, the debate surrounding a "German Islam" requires a nuanced, research-based perspective that considers both societal polarisation and adaptive processes of integration.

The study offers the following recommendations:

- Support for civil society organisations: Muslim women's organisations and other progressive Muslim networks should receive targeted assistance to strengthen their role in building cultural bridges between the broader society and Muslim communities.

- Digital awareness and media literacy: Educational initiatives should help Muslim adolescents recognise Islamist online strategies and develop critical thinking toward radical content.

- Algorithmic transparency and platform responsibility: Social media companies should invest in systems that detect and curb Islamist propaganda early on, preventing the spread of extremist material. This includes reviewing and adjusting algorithms that may amplify radical content.

- Combating anti-Muslim racism: Policymakers and society at large should address discrimination against Muslims more consistently, thereby improving social participation and reducing the risk of extremist reactions.

- Linking research and practice: To understand social cohesion dynamics more fully, future studies should pay closer attention to power relations and relate experiences of discrimination and exclusion to the responses and coping strategies of Muslim (women's) organisations. Equally important is fostering close, transdisciplinary collaboration between academia, practitioners, and Muslim communities to develop and evaluate innovative approaches in co-creative settings. ■

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# Chapter 11: Crisis Communication by Islamic Organisations following Attacks with an Islamist Background

*Gerrit Hirschfeld and Sabrina Hegner (Project OKAI)*

## 1. Background

Terrorist attacks inflict direct harm on victims and also carry numerous indirect effects, such as reinforcing prejudices (Frey 2022). Anti-Muslim sentiment often arises in the aftermath of Islamist attacks (Saleem et al. 2017). Muslim communities are associated with the actions of individual Islamist fundamentalists and held collectively responsible for the actions of individuals (Bruneau et al. 2018; Abdullah 2015). In non-Muslim countries, Islamic organisations often serve as central points of contact for dialogue, including and especially after Islamist terrorist attacks. To date, Islamic organisations in Germany have issued press releases condemning these acts in their wake. However, the effectiveness of such statements remains unclear. The OKAI research project ("Optimised crisis communication after attacks with an Islamist Background in Germany") aims to contribute to this debate.

Although no specific studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies after terrorist attacks, research shows robust links between attributed responsibility and reputational damage, as well as evidence that effective crisis communication strategies can protect an organisation's reputation in various crisis situations (see Ma and Zhan 2016 for an overview). It can therefore be assumed that a statement by an Islamic organisation following an Islamist terrorist attack can positively influence perceptions of the organisation and possibly improve attitudes towards Muslims and Islam (Paolini et al. 2006; Aberson 2015; Kauff et al. 2017). Accordingly, the research project tested whether crisis communication by Islamic organisations after an Islamist attack could improve the organisations' reputation, reduce anti-Muslim bias, and counteract broader Islamophobia.

The research project focused on four related research questions:

(1)To what extent do Islamic organisations and associations attempt to engage in public discourse through press releases after attacks, and what communication strategies do they use?

(2) What influence do statements by Islamic organisations have on the perception of the Islamic organisation, of Muslims, and on prejudices against Islam?

(3) To what extent are not only explicit attitudes but also implicit attention processes influenced by statements??

(4) How can these findings be transferred into practice?

## 2. Methodology

The four research questions were addressed using different methods.

### Communication strategies of Islamic organisations and associations

In order to determine the status quo of communication strategies employed by Islamic organisations and individuals, communication strategies following terrorist attacks were reconstructed and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively on the basis of over 200 statements and press releases. To this end, press releases from 14 national and seven regional Islamic associations in Germany were examined following terrorist attacks between 2015 and 2020. In addition, regional (*WAZ, MAZ*) and national newspapers (*BILD, Zeit, Süddeutsche, TAZ, Spiegel)* and news websites (*Spiegelonline, tagesschau.de*) were searched for the names of chairpersons and

organisations in order to find further reactions. Statements on 27 attacks with an Islamist background were recorded, along with 22 statements on attacks with an Islamophobic background for comparison.

### Influence of statements on perception and prejudice

Three online experiments were conducted to gain insights into the effects of different communication strategies, in which participants were presented with fictitious statements by Islamic organisations. A total of 1,500 subjects took part in the experiments (500 per experiment). All participants (except for the control group) first read a newspaper article describing a fictitious attack in Berlin that was classified as Islamist. The article was followed by a statement of an Islamic organisation in response to the attack (worded according to one of the four communication strategies proposed in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, SCCT, by Coombs & Holladay 1996). Finally, participants completed a questionnaire about their attitudes towards the Islamic organisation, Muslims in general, and Islam.

In another experiment involving 599 participants, actual statements about real terrorist attacks were used. The main difference to the first experiment was that the actual statements often contained a combination of different communication strategies. Once again, attitudes towards the Islamic organisation, Muslims in general, and Islam were assessed. In addition, the perceived distancing, the perceived social engagement of the organisation, and the perceived emotionality of the statement were measured. The study included real statements from 10 Islamic organisations that were issued after the attack on the Berlin Christmas market in 2016.

### Influence of statements on implicit attention processes

Studies in economic contexts (e.g. Claeys & Cauberghe 2014) have shown that negative media coverage about a company leads test subjects to spend more time looking at negative information about the company. Such implicit attention processes can constitute a mechanism through which individual pieces of negative information develop into stable (negative) stereotypes.

Accordingly, an eye-tracking experiment was conducted with 202 test subjects to investigate whether the communication strategy of an Islamic organisation influences the amount of attention test subjects pay to negative information about Muslims that is presented later. Eye fixations, i.e. areas that the participants look at more closely, were recorded and documented. The participants were presented with a total of 12 newspaper articles, spread across four screenshots. The first article contained a description of the aforementioned fictional Islamist attack in Berlin, followed by a response to the attack from an Islamic organisation (worded using the SCCT). The other newspaper articles dealt with various other topics (Netflix, Bitcoin, NASA). Finally, the last screenshot contained two articles about Muslims, one reporting on them positively and the other negatively. After reading the articles, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire containing sociodemographic data, knowledge about the articles they had read, their attitudes towards the various actors in the articles, and questions about the presentation of the articles. The key dependent variable was the participants‘ attention after reading different versions of the articles, measured by the duration of their fixation on negative articles about Muslims. Another questionnaire asked participants for their explicit assessment of the Islamic organisation in question.

### Practical application

To tailor these recommendations to the target audience, 12 workshops (June–September 2023) with 30 representatives from Islamic organisations, cultural centres, and congregations were held.

## 3. Key Findings

The overall findings show that active crisis communication plays a decisive role in promoting positive attitudes toward Muslim organizations. The results illustrate that simply issuing a statement has a greater impact than the selected crisis communication strategy. Although no strategy can completely eliminate the negative reputational effects of an Islamist attack, every statement tested led to a more positive perception than no statement at all.

### Communication strategies of Islamic organisations and associations

A total of 226 statements responding to attacks were identified, 137 of which were related to Islamist attacks and 89 to Islamophobic attacks. Statements were far more common after attacks in major cities than in smaller towns. Four of the seven Islamist attacks in Germany between 2015 and 2020 prompted no statement at all. The Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) and the Turkish-Islamic Union (DITIB) issued the most press releases, both in newspapers and on social media.

The organisations use a wide range of crisis communication strategies. Statements on Islamophobic incidents tend to include concrete details about the location, time, and damages, and invoked religious themes more frequently than responses to Islamist attacks. The results suggest that Islamic organisations adapt their communication strategies to the type of attack (Islamist vs. Islamophobic).

### Impact of statements on perceptions and prejudice

Across all studies, active crisis communication was found to be crucial in promoting positive attitudes towards Islamic organisations. The findings illustrate that merely issuing a statement has a greater impact than the crisis communication strategy chosen. While no strategy can completely eliminate the negative reputational effects of an Islamist attack, every statement tested led to a more positive perception than remaining silent.

The experiments using fictional scenarios show that statements issued by Islamic organisations after Islamist terrorist attacks increase trust in the organisation. Participants who read a statement showed more trust and more positive attitudes towards the organisation than those who only read the article without the statement or were told that no statement had been issued. Studies with real post-attack statements found that merely condemning or distancing from the perpetrators did not influence public opinion. By contrast, highlighting the organisation's social commitment and positive initiatives improved both its reputation and broader attitudes toward Muslims. This strategy not only has an impact on the organisation, but also positively influences the perception of the broader Muslim community.

In addition, there is a strong link between the attributed collective responsibility for terrorism and negative attitudes towards the Islamic organisation, Muslims, and Islam.

### Influence of statements on attention processes

The eye-tracking study showed no significant differences in the viewing time of negative articles about Muslims, regardless of whether the participants had previously been presented with an active crisis communication or had been informed that no comment had been issued. The chosen communication strategy also had no systematic influence on the direction of attention. However, effects in terms of the reputation of the Islamic organisation in question were replicated: after reading articles that included a statement, a more positive attitude towards the organisation was observed than after reading articles without a statement. Overall, the results of the eye-tracking experiment confirm the findings of the other studies, which suggest that active crisis communication strategies should be used.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Terrorist attacks deepen social divisions. The most effective remedy is open dialogue—both from Islamic organisations and from broader society and the media.

### Recommendations for Islamic organisations

Many Islamic organisations hesitate to issue statements after Islamist attacks, fearing that any mention, even a distancing one, may associate them with the perpetrators. This study shows that this concern is unfounded and that organisations should work to overcome this concern and actively use their communication channels after Islamist attacks. Any response is better than none, but the more emotional the response, and the more they underscore their genuine community engagement, the more positively they will be perceived.

Further professionalisation is also crucial: press releases should be worded more professionally and, if possible, published on the day that the attack happens. This requires clear responsibilities and communication strategies that are established in advance.

### Recommendations for civil society and the press

Mainstream society should let Islamic organisations choose how best to express their condemnation, instead of prescribing specific gestures (e.g., public demonstrations). Otherwise, the organisations may feel restricted in their ability to act and develop a negative attitude.

Journalists can also help reduce social division by involving Islamic organisations in their coverage more consistently. The frequency with which statements by Islamic organisations are published and quoted in reports on attacks varies widely and seems to diminish over time. Establishing journalistic standards for reporting on attacks would be useful in this context.

### Recommendations for researchers

The project examined how Islamic organisations are perceived after Islamist attacks and how they can optimise their communication. However, prescriptive research needs to be conducted sensitively, and recommendations should be formulated accordingly, as Islamic organisations could perceive this as an infringement of their autonomy.

In addition, extremism research would benefit from more experimental evidence to avoid false conclusions. It remains unclear whether negative media coverage about Muslims is solely due to the connection with attacks or whether declining intercultural contacts play a greater role. While experimental designs are standard in other fields of research, they are rarely used in extremism research. An analysis of 14,000 empirical studies on extremism prevention found that only nine included a control group (Jugl et al. 2020). To bring about change, greater emphasis should therefore be placed on experimental study designs. ■

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# Chapter 12: Islamic Religious Education Between Expectations and Reality: Opportunities and Limitations in Preventing Islamist Radicalisation

*Margit Stein, Alexandra Schramm and Veronika Zimmer (Project UWIT)*

## 1. Background

Schools provide a central setting where every child and adolescent in a cohort can be reached and where they are required to spend a large part of their formative years in heterogeneous peer groups. Society assigns schools an extensive range of tasks and functions, placing high expectations on their socialising, educational, and preventive roles (Körs 2023; Zimmer and Stein 2024). Within the curriculum, religious education is distinctive because it is the only subject explicitly protected by the German constitution (Basic Law, Article 7). With a growing number of Muslim students in several federal states, especially in the western states where many Muslims live, many schools have already introduced Islamic Religious Education (IRE) (Ströbele 2021; Zimmer and Stein 2024). Pilot programs in IRE, including those in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state, were accompanied by academic evaluation and were well received by both parents and students (Uslucan 2015).

From a socio-political perspective, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is burdened with high expectations. It is expected to integrate Muslim children and adolescents into society, raise the visibility of Islam in Germany and thus promote appreciation of Muslims, and, not least, help prevent radicalisation. Educational professionals, especially teachers, play a pivotal role in meeting these goals and must be prepared accordingly. Lecturers at the centres and institutes of Islamic theology are crucial in training future IRE teachers and theologians, who in turn can serve as multipliers against radical tendencies.

The UWIT project, "Causes and Effects of Radical Islam from the Perspective of (Aspiring) Theologians", examined the specific contribution that schools—particularly (Islamic) religious education—can make to developing intercultural and reflective competencies that both guard against radicalisation and support identity formation. The study centred on how lecturers and university students view their own field of practice and the challenges they encounter in their professional setting.

## 2. Methodology

A document analysis investigated how radicalisation is addressed in Islamic theology degree programs. Bachelor's and master's courses in Islamic Theology, Religion, Religious Education, and teacher preparation for religious studies were examined. Sources included module descriptions, handbooks, program overviews, subject-specific regulations, and study and examination statutes. Conducted in February 2022, the review covered every German institution offering these programs: the universities of Erlangen–Nuremberg, Frankfurt on the Main (including Giessen), Munster, Osnabrück, Tubingen, Berlin, and Hamburg, together with the universities of education in Karlsruhe, Ludwigsburg, Weingarten, and Freiburg.

26 lecturers and 19 students at 11 of the 13 German centres and institutes of Islamic theology were interviewed about their views on Islamist radicalisation and the potential positive contributions of Islamic Religious Education (IRE). The interviews recorded how, from their respective positions as lecturers or students, they design or experience respectively, training to recognise and prevent possible cases of radicalisation.

A nationwide survey of 864 students then examined how often those enrolled in social-science and teacher training programs encounter themes such as interreligious relations, interculturality, education for democracy, and religiously motivated radicalisation, and how they rate their preparedness for dealing with these issues in their future careers.

## 3. Key Findings

### Document Analysis

The examination of bachelor's programs reveals two main emphases. First, study courses engage with Islamic legal schools and theological strands present the religion's heterogeneity and diversity. Second, they provide methodological training in judgment and communication skills aimed at encouraging students' self-reflection. Although the curricula generally promote democratic understanding and openness, radicalisation and its prevention appear only sporadically and rarely in explicit terms in the module descriptions. Most modules instead focus on developing interpretive, judgment, and dialogue competencies that are essential for a reflective approach to religious and socio-political issues in teaching.

Master's programs in Islamic Theology aim to prepare students for a reflective and competent teaching career in religious education. They build on the competencies introduced at the bachelor's level, with a clear progression toward the analytical skills needed to address societal challenges and to design effective religious instruction. Both bachelor's and master's degrees emphasise the perception and interpretation of religious phenomena and the formation of critical judgment. Their focus remains on theoretical reflection rather than on practical strategies for dealing with radicalisation.

### Qualitative interviews with instructors and students

All of the instructors surveyed, and almost all of the students recognise a link between the challenges of (religious) identity formation and a tendency toward radical views. The students of Islamic Theology identify two main causes of susceptibility to Islamist propaganda and radicalisation: a lack of knowledge about Islam and low self-esteem during crises and conflicts in their identity development. They therefore see their primary responsibilities in teaching accurate information about Islam and supporting school students in building their own identities. These students bring knowledge, personal experiences, and background information about young people's religious development and potential radicalisation factors from their studies and other areas of experience. However, their explanations tend to focus on only a few factors and lack a balanced, multifactorial perspective. In contrast, the instructors offer far more nuanced accounts. They view radicalisation as driven by multiple factors at various levels. They place less emphasis than the students on individual-level factors of radicalisation and instead give greater weight to broader societal drivers such as discrimination, marginalisation, and international conflicts.

According to the instructors, preventing radicalisation plays a vital role in shaping religious education. Still, it is addressed less explicitly than teaching reflective, well-grounded knowledge about Islam. Prevention is seen as part of a reflective curriculum overall and a lifelong, holistic task shared by parents, early childhood centres, schools, and youth organisations outside school. It should not fall solely to religious education as a token effort. Collaboration between schools and other social institutions is essential. Despite its limitations, religious education and its teachers are viewed as especially important in this regard.

With regard to the training of prospective teachers, instructors report that there are generally no courses dedicated exclusively to the topic of Islamist extremism or radicalisation. Rather, the issue is addressed as a cross-cutting theme across various courses. Students likewise emphasise that radicalisation is integrated into their training more implicitly than explicitly. Many of them criticise the limited availability of opportunities to engage with the topic in a way that is grounded in real-world challenges and lived experiences.

### Quantitative student survey

Students report receiving limited training in the areas of interreligious dialogue, intercultural competence, democratic education, and religion-based radicalisation. This is particularly true for students in teacher training programs, who note a lack of in-depth engagement with these topics. Between one-quarter and one-third of teachers state that they frequently encounter religiously motivated conflicts in everyday school life, yet feel insufficiently prepared to address them. Similar experiences are shared by social workers and educators involved in (non-)formal child and youth education.

Only 23.4% of teacher training students in master's programs (bachelor's: 7%) report having encountered content related to religion-based radicalisation and prevention during their studies. In contrast, this proportion is somewhat higher among students of social work (master's: 14.7%, bachelor's: 20.1%) and educational sciences (master's: 40%, bachelor's: 46.2%). A comparable pattern emerges with respect to topics related to Islam and Muslim life, which were covered in the studies of only 17.8% of teacher training students at the bachelor's level and 19.1% at the master's level, compared to 49.8% and 46.1% of students in social work and 40% and 67.3% in educational sciences (master's and bachelor's, respectively).

This discrepancy points to the need for a critical revision of curricula and module plans—particularly within teacher training programs—to ensure adequate preparation for the professional demands of educational practice.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, the preparation of future teachers for addressing societal challenges related to Muslim students can be described as comprehensive and holistic. However, certain aspects, such as radicalisation, are rarely addressed explicitly, revealing a tension between educational practice and the broader sociopolitical expectations placed on Islamic Religious Education (IRE). Teachers and educational professionals report feeling insufficiently equipped to handle issues of interreligious relations, religiously motivated conflicts, and radicalisation in the school context. The findings further indicate that while radicalisation is implicitly and indirectly addressed in a number of courses, it is rarely the explicit focus of dedicated seminars.

There remains, therefore, a need to integrate these topics more thoroughly into teacher training programs, as well as a continued demand for research—particularly concerning the effectiveness of such training with regard to radicalisation prevention and the promotion of a pluralistic society. For a more comprehensive approach to prevention, issues such as interreligious and intercultural conflict, mutual understanding, anti-racism, and the fostering of democratic values must be more firmly embedded within the curricula of all teacher education and social science programs.

The overarching goal should be to prepare teachers and educational practitioners to develop targeted strategies and offerings that meaningfully incorporate the lived realities of (Muslim) youth. A practice-oriented model of study should be designed in an interdisciplinary manner, combining theoretical knowledge with practical competencies. This includes fostering interreligious and intercultural dialogue, critical thinking, and empathy. Students should be empowered to understand, respect, and constructively engage with the diversity around them to help build an inclusive and equitable society.

Beyond solid teacher training, it is crucial to design tailored integrative programs for all young people. These should encourage interreligious and intercultural understanding and democratic competency. Such efforts can help minimise the challenges faced by Muslim youth in Western societies as they navigate the tension between integration and maintaining a connection to their religion. To provide youth of any religion, ethnicity, or social background with a safe environment for their (religious) identity development, interreligious and intercultural understanding, as well as democratic competence should be promoted at a societal level. ■

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# Chapter 13: Challenges and Conditions for the Successful Prevention and Disengagement of Young People from Islamist Radicalisation

*Eike Bösing, Yannick von Lautz, Mehmet Kart and Margit Stein (Project Distanz)*

## 1. Background

Islamist radicalisation and attempts to address it through prevention and intervention are currently pressing issues. Extensive research has shown that radicalisation processes are influenced by a combination of multidimensional factors. These include biographical crises, authoritarian attitudes, but also identity conflicts typical of young people, alienation from mainstream society, or experiences of discrimination (Akkuş et al. 2020; Aslan et al. 2018; El-Mafaalani 2017; Schramm et al. 2023; Weitzel and Kurtenbach 2023; Wolfowicz et al. 2020; Zimmer et al. 2022; 2023).

A broad landscape of services has developed in Germany in the field of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), focusing on the prevention of radicalisation and support of disengagement processes. P/CVE actors aim to motivate radicalised individuals to distance themselves from Islamist groups and attitudes and to enable long-term rehabilitation and reintegration. To this end, they counsel the social environment or work directly with individuals themselves, often over a period of several months or years. Practitioners develop an intimate understanding of clients' lives and can be pivotal in their disengagement. Nevertheless, their experiences and perspectives often remain unheard. This also applies to professionals in formal educational structures, who are often the first point of contact for young people. Systematic analysis of their experiences and practices can therefore advance professionalisation of this field and expand knowledge about prevention and (de)radicalisation.

The project "Structural Causes of Approaching and Distancing from Islamist radicalisation – Development of preventive educational counselling approaches" (Distanz) aimed to identify the key conditions for successful radicalisation prevention and support in disengagement processes. The focus was on two aspects:

(1) Identifying challenges and needs in the context of (perceived) radicalisation tendencies in formal education systems

(2) Analysing the experiences of professionals, their practices, and the conditions for success in radicalisation prevention and deradicalisation work

## 2. Methodology

In order to analyse the challenges and needs relating to religiously motivated conflicts and radicalisation in schools and extracurricular youth work, both quantitative and qualitative surveys were conducted among people who work with children, young people, and their parents.

The Germany-wide quantitative survey conducted in 2023 included a sample of 694 teachers and education professionals. The questionnaire covered three key topics: a) perceptions of religious diversity in schools, b) experiences with religiously motivated conflicts in school settings, and c) experiences with Islamist radicalisation in school settings.

In addition, 70 interviews were conducted with people who work with children, young people, and their parents, either in schools or in extracurricular settings, such as open youth clubs or youth living groups. Participants were included if they had ever sought internal or external support for a conflict they subjectively identified as religiously motivated. The interview guide included open-ended questions on individual and

organisational experiences of stress, on dealing with conflicts and, in particular, on cooperation with external counselling centres and other actors involved in prevention work.

In order to analyse professional practice and conditions for success in prevention and deradicalisation work, 25 interviews with practitioners were conducted with a cross-case perspective as well as nine case-specific interviews.

## 3. Key Findings

### Quantitative survey on religious conflicts in schools

Although around 80% of respondents perceive religious diversity as significant, only 52% say that this topic is actively addressed in their school. Despite this gap, around 73% of respondents feel confident in dealing with religious diversity. Around half of respondents (53.5%) emphasise the need for further training on dealing with religious diversity and Islamist radicalisation in schools.

Around a third of respondents observe religiously motivated conflicts between students. Interreligious conflicts are mentioned most frequently, followed by conflicts over the interpretation and practice of religion, conflicts relating to the equal rights of different religions, intra-religious disputes, and attempts at proselytizing. Despite the question not being specifically about religion, the respondents almost exclusively describe conflicts that are perceived in the context of Islam or students who are perceived as Muslim.

Of those surveyed, 36.6% reportedly face challenges related to students‘ religious practices. About a quarter (26%) report experiences with Islamist attitudes and statements at their school. These figures are based on the subjective assessments of those surveyed, not on objective evaluations or documented cases. Noteworthy examples include religiously motivated sexism, fundamentalism, rejection of other religions, and religiously motivated hostility towards queer people.

In addition, religiously motivated antisemitism and rejection of democratic principles are identified as relevant categories. Categories that indicate a direct link to religious extremism, such as a positive reference to Islamist groups, a positive reference to Islamist attacks/incidents, or the use of Islamist symbols, are mentioned significantly less frequently in comparison.

Several respondents draw a contrasting distinction between ‘Muslim’ and ‘German’ students in their descriptions, implying that these identity characteristics are incompatible with each other. This perception can lead to the stigmatisation of students perceived as Muslim.

### Qualitative study on religious conflicts in schools and extracurricular youth work

Teachers and educational professionals identify discriminatory and derogatory remarks with a religious connotation as a particular challenge in everyday school life. In terms of structural challenges, points of conflict emerge in areas such as religious fasting, religious dress codes, prayer times, and religious holidays. Problems arise especially when students who express demands based on their religious beliefs encounter a lack of flexibility on the part of school administrators.

Many teachers also report religiously motivated conflicts and challenges in their work with parents. For example, when parents do not accept their children‘s lifestyle choices with regard to their own religious or sexual identity or their right to self-determination in relationships, or when students ask for help and mediation, for example in cases of forced marriage.

According to the respondents, it is striking that young people perceived as male tend to be seen more as conflict-provoking, while those perceived as female tend to be seen as more affected.

The respondents appear to feel very helpless in dealing with the conflicts, challenges, and cases of radicalisation mentioned, which often results in a lack of action, avoidance of the problem, or overreaction. The

respondents often rely on factual discussion as a solution strategy, while neglecting more relationship-oriented approaches. In many cases, this is attributed to a lack of time and insufficient support. Overall, the respondents identify a high need for counselling, training, and further education.

### Expert interviews: Conditions for success in preventing radicalisation

The interviews illustrate that deradicalisation is a complex process that can depend on socio-economic conditions, the social environment, and institutional support. Particular emphasis is placed on structural conditions: precarious living conditions and inadequate access to education increase vulnerability to Islamist radicalisation. At the same time, discrimination and exclusion of Muslims or people perceived as Muslim make the disengagement process more difficult. Social relationships also play an important role, with family, partnerships, and social interaction in both analogue and digital spaces being key factors. Positive insights for disengagement can be generated by addressing family conflicts and integrating individuals into healthy social networks. Conversely, family crises, problematic partnerships, or isolation in peer groups can reinforce radicalisation. Social stability through close, supportive relationships is therefore crucial. Finally, the importance of cooperation between security authorities and civil society actors and the need for target group-specific approaches are emphasised. This cooperation can be hindered by data-privacy concerns and conflicting operational logics, making transparent, coordinated approaches essential.

### Expert interviews: practical approaches to radicalisation prevention and deradicalisation

Four disengagement and deradicalisation approaches were identified. In everyday practice, these are not static approaches, but rather intuitive strategies implemented and combined in various ways, with considerable overlap:

(1) The religious-ideological approach aims to challenge extremist beliefs through argumentation and discussion.

(2) The acceptance-oriented approach focuses on personal support and the experiencing of acceptance.

(3) The systemic approach concentrates on the social stabilisation of affected individuals.

(4) The life management approach aims to strengthen resilience and self-organisation, for example through psychological or economic support.

With regard to the professional concepts of specialists, especially in relation to how they organise the relationships and interactions, three types can be identified:

(1) The commitment type is characterised by a high level of dedication and a strong emotional attachment to the success of the case. These professionals focus on holistic, but generally boundary-less, relationship work.

(2) The expertise type emphasises factual knowledge and highlights the expert status of the professionals. This carries the risk of degrading the clientele.

(3) The advocacy type is characterised by clear representation of interests and advocacy for the clients. These professionals seek to establish trusting relationships and create experiences of appreciation.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The project underscores the importance of promoting democracy as both a core and cross-cutting priority. It also highlights the need for comprehensive early prevention strategies that avoid singling out or stigmatising any one group and instead engage all young people as learners in a shared educational process. To achieve this, institutional structures – especially schools and open youth work – must play a more significant role than they have done to date. Furthermore, holistic radicalisation prevention must also strengthen professionals

in institutional structures. The considerable uncertainty expressed by the teachers and educators surveyed must be addressed through further education and improved initial training.

Time and financial resources must also be allocated to implement the important cross-cutting tasks of fostering class cohesion, democratic education, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, and radicalisation prevention. This can also be achieved by involving external partners who strengthen democratic skills in an accessible manner. Especially in the early stages, radicalisation processes and emerging tendencies should be addressed within existing systems wherever possible, both in families and in professional contexts such as youth work and schools.

Even within the differentiated field of P/CVE, defined by specific approaches and areas of need, there is a continuing need for well-trained professionals capable of handling complex cases. Early professionalisation is essential, particularly in a field characterised by high turnover and short-term project funding. Here, too, there is a need for education and further training to develop additional skills in counselling techniques and professional relationship work. Despite the high demands placed on counselling work, no leading profession has yet emerged in this multi-professional field, and a wide range of professional groups with different levels of knowledge are involved in practice. Close ties to the fields of social work and social pedagogy seem to be conducive to further professionalisation to comprehensively support clients and enable them to experience empowerment, autonomy, and self-efficacy outside of radical attitudes and groups. This could also ease tensions between counselling services and security authorities by enabling a coherent professional stance in the negotiation of problem interpretations and proposed solutions. ■

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