ISSUE BRIEF

GERMANY AT A CROSSROADS: ASSESSING THE RISE OF ANTI-MUSLIM SENTIMENT

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

Introduction

Germany, a country long known for its progressive policies and welcoming stance toward immigrants, finds itself at a crossroads. The question of whether Germany is becoming an increasingly anti-Muslim society has gained prominence in recent years, fuelled by political, social, and demographic shifts. This write-up seeks to analyse whether Germany is indeed moving toward a more hostile stance on Islam and its followers. It evaluates trends in public sentiment, political developments, and governmental responses, supported by evidence from multiple sources.

Historical Context of Immigration and Integration

Germany has a long history of immigration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries. Following the labour shortage in the post-World War II period, the country invited millions of guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*[1]), many of whom were from Türkiye, North Africa, and other Muslim-majority regions. By the turn of the 21st century, Germany was home to nearly five million Muslims, accounting for about 6.1% of the population.[2]

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[1]   "Recruiting "guest workers" ("Gastarbeiter")", Motif series – Migration history in images, DOMiD (Documentation Center and Museum of Migration in Germany, accessed on December 06, 2024. https://domid.org/en/news/migrationhistory-in-pictures-1960-recruitment/

[2]   "The Growth of Germany's Muslim Population", Pew Research Center, published on November 29, 2017. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/29/the-growth-of-germanys-muslim-population-2/

Despite initial optimism that immigrants would eventually assimilate into German society, integration has proven more complex. Over the years, tensions arose due to cultural and religious differences, leading to debates over the visibility of Islam in public spaces, the wearing of the hijab, and the construction of mosques. These debates have polarized perceptions of Muslims in Germany.[3]

Public Sentiment and Social Attitudes

Public opinion polls indicate a growing apprehension toward Muslims in Germany. According to a 2020 study[4] by Bertelsmann Stiftung, nearly half of Germans surveyed expressed fear of Islam, reflecting broader trends across Europe. This fear is fuelled by a combination of factors, including terrorism concerns, the refugee crisis, and socio-economic challenges—mirroring developments in countries like France, Italy, and Poland.

Muslims in Germany frequently report experiencing discrimination. The European Islamophobia Report (2021)[5] documented a rise in Islamophobic incidents, ranging from verbal abuse to physical attacks. Additionally, a 2019 survey[6] by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation found that 40% of respondents believed "Islam is not compatible with the German way of life."

While these figures highlight societal challenges, it is essential to contextualize them. Public fears are often linked to specific events, such as terrorist attacks or the 2015 refugee crisis, rather than a blanket opposition to Islam. This nuance underscores the need for targeted interventions to address misinformation and prejudice.

Political Developments

Political rhetoric is a key driver of social attitudes, and in Germany, there has been a noticeable shift toward anti-Muslim discourse. The rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a far-right populist party, is particularly concerning. Initially formed as a Eurosceptic party, the AfD has evolved into a

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3   "Special study of Islam – An overview of the most important findings", The Bertelsmann Stiftung, published on August 31, 2015.
https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/special-study-of-islam

4   "Intolerance towards Muslims in Germany growing, survey finds", Daily Sabah, published on July 13, 2019.
https://www.dailysabah.com/islamophobia/2019/07/13/intolerance-toward-muslims-in-germany-growing-survey-finds

5   Bayrakli, Willson, et.al. "European Islamophobia Report 2021", Leopold Weiss Institute, Austria, accessed on December 5, 2024.
https://www.academia.edu/88956663/European_Islamophobia_Report_2021

6   Marcel Fürstenau, "Germany: Right-wing hostility towards democracy growing", DW, published on September 21, 2023.
https://www.dw.com/en/germany-right-wing-extremism-and-hostility-toward-democracy-growing/a-66881144

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stronghold of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric, capitalizing on fears related to the refugee crisis. In the 2017 federal elections, the AfD won 12.6% of the vote, entering the Bundestag as the third-largest party.[7]

The AfD's platform includes calls for banning mosque construction, prohibiting religious symbols such as the hijab in public institutions, and limiting Muslim immigration. Their rise has influenced political discourse, pushing more moderate parties to adopt stricter stances on immigration and integration to counter the AfD's appeal.

Mainstream parties, such as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), have introduced legislation[8] in various states limiting religious symbols in schools and courts. Though framed as measures to promote secularism, these policies disproportionately affect Muslim women, raising concerns about their impact on religious freedoms. This trend underscores the interplay between populist pressures and policy decisions in shaping Germany's approach to Muslim integration.

Media and Representation

Media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, and in Germany, portrayals of Muslims are often skewed toward negative stereotypes. News outlets frequently associate Muslims with topics like terrorism, extremism, and crime, reinforcing fears of Islam as a threat to national security. Such coverage not only alienates Muslim citizens but also exacerbates existing prejudices.[9]

A 2020 study by the University of Leipzig found that over 80% of media reports on Islam were linked to violence or radicalism.[10] Sensationalist coverage of events like the 2015 refugee crisis and more recent pro-Palestinian demonstrations further shapes public perception. For instance, during the 2023 Gaza war, the German media disproportionately highlighted clashes during protests, overshadowing peaceful demonstrations and the diverse perspectives within Muslim communities.[11]

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[7] Lauren Said-Moorhouse & Schams Elwazer, "Four graphics that explain how a far-right party won third place in Germany", CNN World, published on September 25, 2017.
https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/25/europe/germany-afd-election-graphics/index.html

[8] "Angela Merkel endorses burka ban; wherever legally possible'", BBC, published on December 6, 2016.
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38226081

[9] Valerie Snaman, "News media affects how Muslims are perceived, treated", START – National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, published on March 2, 2016.
https://www.start.umd.edu/news/news-media-affects-how-muslims-are-perceived-treated

[10] Richter & Sünje, "Media representations of Islam in Germany. A comparative content analysis of German newspapers over time", Social Sciences & Humanities Open, Volume # 8 (2023), accessed on December 6, 2024.
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590291123002243?via%3Dihub

[11] "Critique of German media's handling of Gaza conflict", Al Jazeera Journalism Review, Aljazeera Media Institute, published on November 16, 2023.

The recent attack at a Berlin Christmas market involving a Saudi national further exemplifies this trend. While the individual responsible had a documented history of criminal activity and anti-Islamic rhetoric, early media reports portrayed the incident as potentially linked to Islamist motivations.[12] This not only misrepresented the facts but also contributed to the broader climate of suspicion surrounding Muslims in Germany. Such cases underscore the urgent need for more balanced and accurate media reporting to prevent the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes.

This biased representation risks creating a one-dimensional view of Muslims in Germany, framing them primarily as sources of unrest or conflict rather than as integrated members of society. Counter-narratives, emphasizing contributions of Muslims to German society, remain underrepresented in mainstream media.

Legal and Institutional Responses

Despite these challenges, it would be inaccurate to label Germany as systematically anti-Muslim at the institutional level. The country's legal framework guarantees religious freedom and includes significant efforts to promote the integration of Muslims into German society.

Germany offers pathways to citizenship for long-term immigrants and has implemented various initiatives to combat xenophobia, promote interfaith dialogue,[13] and strengthen anti-discrimination measures. For example, the "National Action Plan against Racism,"[14] launched in 2017, underscores Germany's commitment to addressing discrimination, including anti-Muslim bias, by protecting individuals from discrimination, punishing racist violence, and fostering diversity in workplaces and civil society.[15] Stricter penalties for hate crimes were introduced in 2020, with amendments to the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) requiring social media platforms to report hate speech and neo-

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https://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/2428

[12] "Saudi Arabia warned German police over market suspect's extreme views", The Telegraph, published on December 21, 2024.
https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/12/21/magdeburg-suspect-is-pro-afd-saudi-doctor/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[13] "German Islam Conference", German Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, accessed on December 10, 2024.
https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/community-and-integration/german-islam-conference/german-islam-conference-node.html

[14] "National Action Plan against Racism", Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, Germany, published June 2017.
https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/EN/publikationen/2018/nap-en.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=8

[15] "Practicing tolerance: How does Germany promote respectful co-existence? An overview of state and social initiatives against racism", Deutschland.de, published November 21, 2021.
https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/life/initiatives-against-racism-in-germany

Nazi propaganda to federal authorities.[16] Additionally, public awareness campaigns such as "Democracy Lives"[17] aim to instil democratic values and tolerance in younger generations, while the 'Forum Against Racism' facilitates dialogue between the government and NGOs to counter Islamophobia and discrimination effectively.[18]

Authorities have also acted against far-right extremist groups propagating anti-Muslim ideologies. According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, hate crimes committed by right-wing extremists increased by 10% from 2020 to 2021, with many targeting Muslim communities.[19] Efforts to dismantle these groups demonstrate Germany's proactive stance against extremism.

However, the implementation of these measures is not without limitations. Critics argue that systemic biases within institutions, including law enforcement, may undermine efforts to address Islamophobia effectively. Ongoing vigilance and accountability are crucial to ensuring meaningful progress.

Conclusion

In evaluating whether Germany is becoming an anti-Muslim society, the evidence presents a mixed picture. There are worrying trends, particularly in public sentiment, political discourse, and media representation. The rise of far-right populism and growing Islamophobic attitudes among segments of the German public cannot be ignored. Incidents of discrimination and hate crimes targeting Muslims have increased, signalling a shift in societal attitudes.[20]

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[16] "Germany: Network Enforcement Act Amended to Better Fight Online Hate Speech", Library of Congress, accessed February 03, 2025.
https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2021-07-06/germany-network-enforcement-act-amended-to-better-fight-online-hate-speech/

[17] "Live Democracy!", German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), accessed February 03, 2025.
https://www.demokratie-leben.de/demokratie-leben/programm/ueber-demokratie-leben-

[18] "Understanding Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes – Addressing the Security Needs of Muslim Communities", OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), accessed on December 10, 2024.
https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/0/448696.pdf

[19] "Brief Summary – 2021 Report on the Protection of the Constitution: Facts & Trends", German Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, accessed on December 10, 2024.
https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/EN/reports-on-the-protection-of-the-constitution/2022-06-brief-summary-2021-report-on-the-protection-of-the-constitution.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3

[20] "Germany Falling Short in Curbing Anti-Muslim Racism", Human Rights Watch (HRW), published on April 30, 2024.
https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/30/germany-falling-short-curbing-anti-muslim-racism

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However, Germany's institutional responses, legal protections, and proactive measures against hate crimes suggest that the state itself is not inherently anti-Muslim. The government's commitment to religious freedom and the rule of law, combined with efforts to promote integration, indicates that while the social climate may be increasingly challenging for Muslims, Germany has not fully transitioned into an anti-Muslim society.

In conclusion, while anti-Muslim sentiment has become more visible in German society, it is essential to differentiate between societal trends and state policies. The trajectory remains uncertain, and much will depend on how Germany addresses these challenges in the coming years, particularly as it grapples with the legacies of immigration, integration, and rising populism. Strengthening counter-narratives, fostering interfaith dialogue, and ensuring equitable policy implementation will be key to shaping a more inclusive society.