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What's behind Germany's raging Islamophobia

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OPINION

On September 16, Germany started extending temporary controls along all its borders, to the chagrin of its European Union neighbors. Interior Minister Nancy Faeser clarified that the move is meant to not only curb "irregular" migration, but also to stop what she called "Islamist terrorism and serious crime". The announcement came in the aftermath of a deadly knife attack that killed three people in Solingen, western Germany; the attacker, a Syrian refugee who had been denied asylum status and was supposed to be deported, was accused of belonging to the Daesh (ISIS) terrorist group. Some may be surprised that such a draconian measure has been imposed by the liberal-left coalition made up of the Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Liberals. But the reality is there is a shift to the right across the German political spectrum accompanied by raging Islamophobia.

It is not the first time Germany fixates on demonizing a racialized group and blaming it for its crises.



Analysts have pointed to the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) as a driver of the rightward shift. Indeed, the party has been making significant gains at the national and state levels. At the start of the month, it won the elections in the eastern state of Thuringia with 32.8 percent. In the eastern state of Saxony, it came second with 30.6 percent, just 1.3 percentage points behind the center-right Christian Democrats. But the electoral successes of the AfD are not a driver; they are a symptom of a general tendency in German politics to normalize and engage in the demonization and scapegoating of Muslims. Members of the ruling coalition have repeatedly denounced "Islamism" in Germany. The leader of the Green Party in the Bundestag, Katharina Dröge, went as far as claiming in a recent statement that "the poison of Islam reaches peo-

ple's minds also here, not just abroad"; later correcting herself that she meant "Islamism" instead of "Islam." Words of warning about an "Islamist threat" are not just in the mouths of German politicians, they are also all over official documents and policy declarations of German institutions. For example, the website of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, a key domestic intelligence agency, warns: "Islamists aim to completely or partially abolish the free democratic basic order of the Federal Republic of Germany by invoking their religion". The Bavarian branch of this federal office has gone even further and introduced on its website the notion of "legalist Islamism", which it defines as a way to pursue "extremist goals by political means within the existing legal system". It clarifies: "Legalist Islamists attempt to influence politics and

society through lobbying [and] present themselves as open, tolerant and open to dialogue to the outside world, while anti-democratic and totalitarian tendencies persist within the organizations." Essentially, this concept can criminalize any group of Muslims who organize politically or socially and conduct their activities within the bounds of the law. It marks any expression of tolerance or openness by Muslims as suspect because it can be a "legalist Islamist presence". Using these concepts as a framework, various institutions at the state and federal levels have created "de-radicalization" programs that have targeted only Muslims. While such initiatives have been criticized and opposed in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States by many social justice workers, in Germany, on the whole, they

are perceived as well-justified and effective. One such programme, the Bavarian Network for Prevention and Deradicalization, recently produced a video about "Salafi radicalization" featuring racist tropes about Muslim men exploiting Muslim women. Earlier this month, the video was posted on social media by the Bavarian state government – currently controlled by the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) – and immediately sparked criticism of its hateful representation of Muslims. The decision to publish made clear that the German authorities perceive the outwardly observing Muslims as a security risk and a danger to German society. The clip was eventually taken down and the Interior Ministry issued a statement to the media, apologizing for the

Supporters of the anti-Islam movement "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West" (PEGIDA) wave flags during a demonstration in Dresden, Germany, on March 21, 2016.
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