RADICALIZATION, MENTAL HEALTH, AND MIGRATION: THE COMPLEX WEB OF VIOLENCE IN GERMANY

by
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Germany has experienced several violent incidents in recent years. Though the attacks occurred in different regions of the country and the assailants used different methods and had different motivations, they have dominated political discourse, with security and immigration policies becoming central issues ahead of the upcoming elections.

The right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), currently polling second in the upcoming February 23 election, are leveraging public fear to advance anti-immigration agendas, risking further polarization. Political parties have called for stricter enforcement of deportation orders and more robust screening processes for asylum seekers.

A heated session on stricter immigration policies unfolded in the German Bundestag amid heightened public debate on immigration following recent violent attacks involving asylum seekers. Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leader Friderich Merz's proposal, backed by both the AfD and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), called for a ban on undocumented migrants entering Germany, stricter immigration controls, a reduction in asylum numbers, and the limiting of family reunifications. The German Bundestag ultimately rejected the proposed immigration bill, but it was only narrowly defeated, 350 votes to 338, marking the second time in a week that CDU leader Friedrich Merz attempted to push immigration restrictions with AfD backing.

Public demand for safety has led to proposals for stricter asylum controls, expanded surveillance powers, and tighter weapons laws. While these measures address immediate concerns, they risk neglecting root causes, such as integration and mental health support.

The Era of Ugliness: A Summary of the Attacks

In a span of three-and-a-half years, Germany has witnessed five harrowing incidents that have left nine people dead and 216 injured. The following are the most well-documented attacks:

• On February 13, 2025, a 24-year-old Afghan refugee deliberately drove his car into a union demonstration in central Munich, killing a 2-year-old girl and her mother and injuring nearly 40 others. Authorities, who have charged the suspect with attempted homicide and causing bodily harm, believe he had religious motives and an Islamist orientation but found no direct ties to terrorist organizations.

• In January 2025, in the northwest Bavarian town of Aschaffenburg, a 28-year-old Afghan asylum seeker, suffering from documented mental health issues, carried out a knife attack on a kindergarten group that left two dead, including a two-year-old boy, and three injured. The attacker's precarious asylum status and history of violent behavior highlight inefficiencies in managing high-risk individuals within the asylum and psychiatric care systems.

• A month earlier in the city of Magdeburg, 155 km west of Berlin, a Saudi-born ex-Muslim drove an SUV into a crowded Christmas market, killing five people and injuring over 200. Despite prior warnings about the attacker dating back to 2015, German authorities failed to act decisively, revealing critical lapses in information-sharing and threat assessment.

• In August 2024, a Syrian asylum seeker affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) killed three and injured eight in Solingen, 25 km east of Düsseldorf, at a festival commemorating the city's 650th anniversary. The attacker's denied asylum application and failed deportation attempt reflect systemic shortcomings in asylum processing and deportation enforcement.

• In Mannheim in May 2024, an Afghan national attacked and killed a police officer during an anti-Islam rally, motivated by Islamist ideology. He also injured five. The attacker's use of a knife, a weapon commonly associated with lone-actor violence, exemplifies the ease with which such attacks can be carried out.

• On June 25, 2021, a 24-year-old Somali man stabbed multiple people in a shopping district in the northern Bavarian city of Würzburg. The attacker, armed with a large kitchen knife, targeted people indiscriminately, killing three women and injuring several others.

Overall, Germany recorded 5.94 million crimes in 2023, a 5.5 percent increase from the previous year and 9.3 percent higher than pre-pandemic levels in 2019. The number of suspects arrested increased 7.3 percent, with 41.3 percent being non-German nationals. Among them, 402,514 were refugees, asylum seekers, or undocumented migrants. Cases of unauthorized entry surged 40 percent, while unauthorized stay rose 29 percent.

In 2023, attacks against asylum seekers and refugee centers in Germany nearly doubled compared to the previous year, according to figures released by the Interior Ministry in 2024. Authorities recorded 2,378 attacks targeting refugees, up from 1,248 in 2022, with at least 219 people injured, most incidents attributed to right-wing extremists. Additionally, 180 attacks on refugee shelters were reported, marking the highest number since 2017.

Germany had taken in more than 1.2 million refugees in 2022, predominantly Ukrainians fleeing the war, while in 2015, over 1 million refugees, mostly Syrians, were accepted amid the height of the refugee crisis.

Weaponizing Fear: Psychological Impact of Arbitrary Violence
The incidents share some common features; they were lone actors who used knives and vehicles, easily accessible and unsophisticated weapons. The stabbings in Aschaffenburg and Solingen were perpetrated by self-radicalized individuals rather than organized terrorist networks and were spontaneous acts of brutality against unsuspecting individuals rather than targeted.

The seemingly arbitrary nature of the attacks magnifies public fear and challenges law enforcement's ability to predict such incidents. The attackers displayed a chilling readiness to resort to violence, reflecting a combination of psychological instability, frustration, and a lack of social constraints.

The culprits often targeted symbolic spaces, such as festivals, public gatherings, police stations, and consulates, to maximize psychological impact. The victims frequently include vulnerable groups, such as children, as seen in Aschaffenburg, further amplifying public outrage and fear.

Many perpetrators of violent attacks in recent years in Germany have suffered from serious mental health issues, including schizophrenia, untreated psychosis, and severe trauma. German authorities have struggled to adequately address the psychological needs of vulnerable individuals due to a shortage of psychiatric specialists and an overburdened mental health care system. Despite this, their risks were underestimated, highlighting the failure to integrate mental health considerations into public safety and counterterrorism efforts. The complex profiles involving mental illness, prior criminal behavior, or failed asylum claims, complicates the response strategy.

Systemic Neglect and Radicalization: Gaps in Germany's Security Framework
The asylum system's inefficiencies, including lengthy processing times, failed deportations, and lack of integration, have created a fertile ground for frustration and radicalization. The attackers in Aschaffenburg and Solingen, for instance, were asylum seekers with unresolved or rejected claims. Their precarious legal status and lack of integration into German society underscore broader issues within the asylum system.

One of the most glaring issues highlighted by these attacks is the dysfunctional coordination among key agencies such as the Bundesamt für Flüchtlinge (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees), Police and Law Enforcement, and Psychiatric Care Facilities. Limited information-sharing between agencies hindered the ability to monitor and address potential threats. For instance, the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) was warned about the Magdeburg

attacker as early as 2015 but deemed the threat "unspecific."

Failure to process [asylum applications](#) efficiently and enforce deportation orders allowed high-risk individuals to remain in the country. Despite receiving warnings about potential attackers, authorities often fail to act decisively due to insufficient evidence or bureaucratic inertia. The [intersection of mental illness, social isolation, and systemic neglect](#) has been a recurring theme. Many attackers lacked adequate support or monitoring, leaving them vulnerable to extremist influences and violent tendencies.

The Mystery of Motivation: Complexities of Profiling Perpetrators
Traditional profiles of Islamist or far-right extremism fail to capture the complex motivations of some attackers. It has become [apparent that hybrid profiles](#), such as individuals with overlapping ideological, personal grievances and mental health issues, have perpetrated these acts of violence. Most attacks highlight the evolving and increasingly complex nature of violent extremism in Germany that can intersect in unpredictable ways.

In regard to the [Solingen case](#), Islamist propaganda, particularly in the wake of the Israel-Hamas conflict, played a significant role in inspiring attacks. The October 7 Hamas attacks and subsequent Israeli reprisals against Palestinians, which resulted in the deaths of many innocent civilians, have added fuel to the fire. Islamist influencers have leveraged these events to intensify their propaganda, portraying the conflict as a moral and religious struggle that demands retaliation. Groups like IS continue to exploit global events to incite local violence.

The rise of online radicalization, particularly [among youth](#), poses a growing challenge. Platforms like TikTok amplify extremist propaganda, creating a false sense of community for vulnerable individuals. This phenomenon necessitates the need for robust online counter-radicalization strategies.

In a recent book [Die Rückkehr des Terrors: Wie](#) [uns der Dschihadismus Herausfordert](#) (*The Return of Terror: How Jihadism Challenges Us*), Peter Neumann explains how the influence of TikTok jihadists and hipster Salafi preachers on youth radicalization in Germany has become increasingly evident. These actors exploit the [algorithmic nature of platforms](#) like TikTok, which amplifies emotionally charged content, to spread extremist propaganda effectively.

Short, visually captivating videos featuring Islamist rhetoric and glorified depictions of martyrdom have resonated with disaffected young people. [Neumann](#) argues that these influencers employ relatable language and cultural references, creating a false sense of community and purpose for vulnerable individuals.

Conclusion
Germany's recent wave of violent attacks has exposed critical vulnerabilities in its security, immigration, and mental health systems. These incidents, often perpetrated by individuals with complex profiles involving mental illness, social isolation, and unresolved asylum statuses, have fueled public fear and political polarization. The rise of anti-immigration rhetoric, coupled with systemic inefficiencies in asylum processing, deportation enforcement, and mental health care, has created a volatile environment. While proposals for stricter security measures address immediate concerns, they risk neglecting deeper issues such as integration, mental health support, and counter-radicalization efforts.

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