



Policy Brief

The (counter)-terrorism situation in Germany

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PARTNER

BHFOD

AUTHORS

BHFOD



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The following presentation of the (Counter-)Terrorism situation in Germany in 2021 has been prepared in conformity with the differentiation of terrorist phenomena introduced in the Europol European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020 (TESAT). Europol distinguishes in the TESAT between the phenomena of Jihadist terrorism, Ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism, Left-wing and anarchist terrorism, right-wing terrorism and single-issue terrorism.

The subject of terrorism came increasingly into the focus of German security authorities during the media-effective activism of the left-wing terrorist, social revolutionary RAF ("Red Army Faction") in the 1970s. The term terrorism generally denotes the most aggressive and militant form of extremism and to this day the characteristics and threat potential of the various types of extremism have changed several times. To be able to counter terrorist threats preventively as well as repressively, current analyses and information from science and law enforcement authorities are essential, wherefor these are summarised briefly in the following.²

1. General overview of terrorism in Germany

The number of crimes with an extremist motivation rose significantly in Germany between 2018 and 2019. In 2019, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution counted more than 22,300 acts related to right-wing extremism, almost 10% more than in the previous year. The same period also saw a 40% rise in left-wing extremism incidents to more than 6,400 acts. However, the proportion of violent acts fell by 15% for right-wing extremism and by almost 10% for left-wing extremism. While there have been significantly fewer Islamist-motivated attacks in the past three years, due to the authorities' vigilance, the threat posed by Islamist extremists to Germany remains high.³

In particular, several homicides with extremist motivation underline terrorism's enduring threat to society and the needs for a proactive approach by law enforcement. The examples of the murder of politician Walter Lübcke in June 2019 and the attack with nine victims in Hanau in 2020, both by right-wing terrorists, highlight the constant high threat of terrorist attacks in Germany.

2. Jihadist terrorism

Since 2015, the Federal Republic of Germany has witnessed various Islamist-motivated attacks using a range of violent tactics. However, the actual number of attacks has decreased since 2016, until three purportedly Islamist attacks in 2020. This decrease in attacks has been attributed to the declining importance of the Islamic State.

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Date	Location	Description	Perpertrators	Injured	Killed
5 Feb. 20215	Hannover, Lower Saxony	Arson attack on a shopping centre	1	0	0
26 Feb. 2016	Hannover , Lower Saxony	Knife attack on a federal police officer	1	1	0
16 Apr. 2016	Essen, North Rhine-Westphalia	Explosives attack on a Sikh prayer house	2	3	0
18 Jul. 2016	Würzburg, Bavaria	Axe attack in a regional train	1	5	1 (Attacker)
24 Jul. 2016	Ansbach, Bavaria	Explosives attack	1	15	1 (Attacker)
18 Dec. 2016	Berlin	Attack on a Christmas market with a truck	1	55	12
28 Jul. 2017	Hamburg	Knife attack in a supermarket	1	5	1
27 Apr. 2020	Waldkraiburg, Bavaria	Arson attack	1	6	0
19 Aug. 2020	Berlin	Attack with a car on the Autobahn 100	1	6	0
4 Oct. 2020	Dresden, Saxony	Knife attack in the city centre	1	1	1

Table 1: Selected Islamist attacks in Germany in recent years (based on data from the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA))

Nevertheless, as the three incidents in 2020 make clear, the danger of Islamist attacks has not averted the threat of Islamist terrorism. In spring 2020, German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer stated that there had been no all-clear concerning this form of terrorism and that there were still around 650 potential offenders in Germany. The main threat still comes from the aftermath of the Islamic State’s activities and the return of significant numbers of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to Germany from Iraq and Syria.

Despite the return of FTFs, it is unclear to what extent potential Islamist offenders in Germany are linked to existing networks or organisations. There are cases, such as the Ansbach bomb attacker, where the perpetrators were encouraged, recruited and instructed to carry out their attack by persons linked to a terrorist network. In the Ansbach case, analysing telecommunications data identified instructions issued by persons connected to the Islamic State. And this appears to be the case for many attacks, where they are carried out by lone perpetrators encouraged by Islamist organisations and actors.⁴

However, there is little evidence of explicit or direct links to specific persons in a terrorist network in other cases. Instead, the attacker’s motivation is suspected of having developed independently; through influences and drivers of radicalisation, exposure to terrorist ideas on the internet or, for example, in prisons or religious communities.

Ultimately, there is a large number of extremist and presumably Islamist extremist associations and actors in Germany. The Salafist scene, which denotes an ultra-conservative way of interpreting Islam, has some preachers representing and spreading extremist and violent views, creating a breeding ground for radicalisation. Other Islamist-extremist movements and actors are also active in Germany, with widely differing ideological bases.

Ultimately, the Bavarian State Office for the Protection of the Constitution’s report for 2019 shows a high potential threat to public security from Islamist actors based in Germany, including returnees and terrorist organisations operating internationally.⁵

Aside from the reduced influence of the Islamic State, the decline of Islamist attacks is also due to the adapted and expanded anti-terrorism measures implemented by the Federal Republic and the federal states. Law enforcement agencies (LEAs) have introduced task forces to tackle Islamist terrorism through increased financing and personnel. Ultimately, this led to a significant strengthening of operational investigative units and accelerated work processes enormously. Such resources made it possible to arrest 32 suspected Islamist terrorists in Germany in 2019⁶, and, so far in 2021, through the cooperation of the German and Danish authorities, 14 people suspected of terrorism were arrested after the seizure of suspicious chemicals and an Islamic State flag indicating a potential planned attack.⁷

Furthermore, German authorities have intensified approaches to preventing radicalisation

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by promoting bans on extremist organisations and implementing measures to curb Islamist activities online, such as disseminating terrorist-generated content, which can initiate or promote radicalisation.⁸

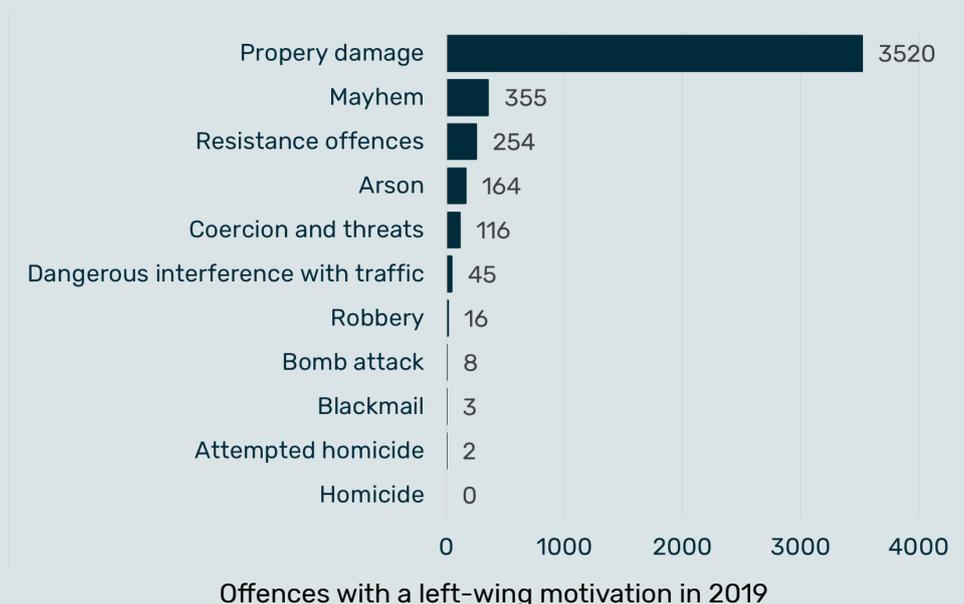
3. Ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism

Recent years have seen few attacks related to ethno-nationalist and separatist movements, primarily resulting in property damage and attributed to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), related organisations and actors. The PKK is a Kurdish, socialist militant underground organisation with origins in Turkey's Kurdish settlement areas. The PKK is known for fighting in Turkey and neighbouring countries for the political autonomy of Kurdish populated regions. The PKK is the strongest and most powerful foreign extremist organisation in Germany. While the PKK is not known to have carried out deadly attacks on personal targets since the 1990s, there was a known risk of potential attacks as recently as 2019, according to the report of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. This is due to a high degree of willingness to use violence within these organisations, evident from demonstrations or disputes with Turkish nationalist organisations. Furthermore, the number of members and sympathisers of Kurdish nationalist organisations rose significantly in recent years due to the worsening situation in northern Syria.⁹

4. Left-wing and anarchist terrorism

Since the 1990s, activism associated with left-wing terrorism has gradually declined in Germany. The left-wing terrorist group RAF, for example, formally dissolved over 20 years ago in 1998. Today, left-wing extremist activism is not associated with fatal attacks on people but operates "at a low level of violence".¹⁰ Alexander Straßner, political scientist and expert on terrorism, stated in 2018, not least for this reason, that left-wing extremism currently poses no threat to the Federal Republic.¹¹ Similarly, Armin Pfahl-Traughber, political scientist and expert on extremism, also considers lethal attacks by left-wing extremists to be unlikely as there would be widespread condemnation even by those who are violence-oriented. The targets of the attacks motivated by left-wing extremism are instead facilities and vehicles.¹²

As is evident in the reports of the constitution protection authorities and the Federal Criminal Police Office, the number of politically motivated crimes has increased since 2000. While the overall threat from left-wing extremists declined in the 2000s, the number of violent left-wing extremists increased. However, most of these violent left-wing extremists do not subscribe to Marxist-Leninist extremists' ideology but to an autonomist one that rejects any state and social norms to try to overcome the ruling system, the democratic constitutional state of the Federal Republic of Germany.¹³



(source: Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV))



Members of "Der III. Weg", a right-wing extremist small party. The majority of the members are classified as highly violent by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution

Contrary to Straßner and Pfahl-Traughber's assessment, however, there were various incidents in 2019 including violent attacks by left-wing extremists on police officers, state and economy representatives, political opponents, and right-wing extremists. For example, there were two attempted murders on economic representatives and right-wing extremists. It is, therefore, clear that the level of violence of left-wing extremism and terrorism is rising with individuals increasingly targeted. Such violent incidents demonstrate a persistently high level of danger, both in terms of criminal and violent offences, as the chart aboveshow. Left-wing extremism still poses a major threat to public security in Germany, which is not reflected in the structures usually classified as terrorist organisations.¹⁴

5. Right-wing terrorism

Until recently, right-wing terrorism was less prominent than left-wing terrorism until the investigation of a series of murders by the terrorist organisation National Socialist Underground (NSU), which became publicly known in 2011. While the existence of right-wing terrorist groups and attacks by individual perpetrators appeared in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, right-wing terrorism was less noticeable due to the low number of attacks that mainly targeted left-wing terrorists.¹⁵ Moreover, the goals of right-wing terrorists did not focus on overcoming the existing political system. Consequently, the attacks were not targeted at political actors but directed at other opponents of right-wing extremists such as migrants and Jews.¹⁶

In 2019, acts of violence by right-wing extremist acts of violence fell by 15% compared to the previous year, while bodily harm offences, which made up the majority (84%) of violent crimes, fell by 16.7%. Right-wing, xenophobia-motivated assaults, which rose in 2018, then saw a decrease of 18.6% in 2019. The total number of xenophobic acts of violence also fell by a total of 15.3%. In 2019, there were seven significant terrorist attacks by right-wing extremists leading to three deaths: the murder of the politician Walter Lübcke and the Halle synagogue attack, which resulted in two deaths. Thus even if right-wing extremists are less frequently engaging in acts of violence, there are dangerous fringe elements in right-wing extremism not found in more established organisations.

Furthermore, these attacks (by NSU, Walter Lübcke and at Halle) changed the perception of the threat posed by right-wing terrorism.¹⁷ The risk from right-wing extremism, including terrorist activism, was reported as high in 2019 by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.¹⁸ The heightened threat posed by right-wing extremism and terrorism became clearer in February 2020 after a right-wing extremist shot and killed nine citizens in Hanau followed by his mother and himself.

The German state is combatting violent right-wing extremism and terrorism through a range of measures. These include the surveillance of suspects, banning of organisations and events and the withdrawal of permits for weapons.

In addition to the conventional forms of right-wing extremism and terrorism, there is also the Reichsbürger-movement, characterised mainly by right-wing extremist ideologies. Reichsbürger can be translated as ‘citizen of the Reich’ and refers to the political systems that preceded the Federal Republic. Thus, the ‘Reichsbürger’ refers to the German Empire, which came to an end in 1918, and less often to the Third Reich, which existed until 1945. The ‘Reichsbürger’ deny and reject the legitimacy of the democratic Federal Republic of Germany and claim to be citizens of the German Reich.

The Reichsbürger scene is characterised by conspiracy theories, historical revisionism, antisemitism and xenophobia; clear overlaps with right-wing extremism. The Reichsbürger members’ direct their sometimes aggressive behaviour at employees of authorities and offices with considerable risk given their affinity for weapons. Therefore, the security authorities are endeavouring to withdraw weapons permits from members of the Reichsbürger or prevent licenses from being granted. However, it is expected that members may illegally arm themselves following the withdrawal of weapons permits. Since the Reichsbürger perceive state measures as unlawful, this can lead to aggressive and dangerous situations, alongside a high (reactive) potential for violence.¹⁹

In October 2016, for example, a Bavarian police officer was murdered by a so-called Reichsbürger member. Subsequently, he had his gun ownership card withdrawn and was required to have his weapons confiscated. Due to an expected threat situation, the Bavarian SEK (Special Operations Unit) were deployed to enter his home. The Reichsbürger member opened fire at the SEK unit through a closed door, killing one of the officers and injuring three others.

6. Single-issue terrorism

There have been several incidents concerning single-issue terrorism in Germany in recent years. Protection of animals, environmental activism and resistance to the G20 summit have all been motivating factors. Opposition to governmental measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has also raised tensions. Opponents of these measures, as well as deniers of the existence of the virus, received a large number of followers and began to mobilise themselves in movements such as “Querdenken” (“Lateral Thinkers”).

The last year has seen multiple violent incidents during demonstrations against the COVID-19 restrictions, and the willingness to use violence is expected to increase. There is a particular cross-over with right-wing extremist attitudes that has led to observations by various Offices for the Protection of the Constitution of the German countries for some of these organisations, namely “Querdenken” and its regional offshoots.²⁰



Disputes between police and demonstrators in the course of the G20 summit in Hamburg

The threat potential from these “corona demonstrations” became evident on 29 August 2020 where right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists stormed the stairs of the Reichstag building, the German Parliament, as part of an escalated protest against the measures to contain the spread of the Coronavirus. In contrast to similar events at the US Capitol in 2021, the storming of the German Parliament was prevented at the last moment by the German

police. Nevertheless, the images of this incident shaped the German media landscape. After a long time, the “Reichsflagge”, a symbol of the German Empire, which ended in 1919, and one that represents Hitler’s Germany and hostility to democracy, was waved on the steps of the Parliament.

Moreover, in February 2021, an attack on an ICE express train in Bavaria, damaged the train, but, fortunately, nobody was injured. According to the current investigation, the perpetrator is hostile to the government measures to curb the spread of the Coronavirus.²¹ Therefore, it is advisable to continue to observe this narrative, particularly in the case of extensions and the possible renewed start of measures at the time of a possible third wave in Germany, to ensure that there will be no further single-issue terrorism incidents.

In particular, an atrocity in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate in September 2021 underscores the importance of single issue terrorism in relation to the rejection of measures to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus: After a 20-year-old petrol station employee advised a 49-year-old to wear a face mask, the 49-year-old shot the employee in the gas station – the motive: frustration with the government measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. According to the authorities for the protection of the constitution, the escalation on this issue has reached a new level thereby, driven, among other things, by hate speech and fake news, especially in social media.

7. Counter-terrorism policing in Germany

In the Federal Republic of Germany, several authorities are involved in preventing, combating and investigating terrorism. Foremost are the constitutional protection authorities, which are entrusted in particular with the prevention and monitoring of suspected extremist and terrorist individuals and organisations. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution operates at the federal level, while all 16 German states have their own state offices for the protection of the constitution. For the purpose of counterterrorism and combating extremism in particular, these intelligence agencies cooperate with all the criminal investigation departments (the Federal Criminal Police Office and the 16 state criminal investigation departments). These criminal investigation departments each have a “Police State Protection” department, which performs danger prevention and prosecution tasks in terrorism cases and deals with all forms of politically motivated crime. With regard to prevention as well as observation, defense and prosecution, the aforementioned authorities follow comprehensive and interlocking strategies at both federal and state levels.



Counterterrorism in Germany is not only based on the cooperation of various national actors, but is also geared to the frequently international nature of terrorist networks, which is why international cooperation is given very high priority. The Federal Republic of Germany is a member of various international organisations and forums in which the fight against international terrorism plays a major role, such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum, and is also engaged in numerous bilateral cooperative efforts. Efforts at the international level are made in particular within the framework of the global anti-terrorism strategy of the United Nations and cooperation within the framework of the European Union.

8. Conclusions

It is becoming clear that terrorism and extremism in Germany pose an enormous threat to public security and the basic German order of freedom and democracy. Those who try to counteract the violent excesses of extremism are faced with difficulties. In particular, the developments in “lateral thinking” are examples of the homogenisation of different extremist movements and ideologies (e.g., right-wing extremists, “Reichsbürger” and conspiracy theorists). This phenomenon will require attention in the future. Conspiracy theorists often bring together a difficult-to-understand kaleidoscope of extremist views, especially those from the right-wing extremist spectrum. While the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, and hate speech are also increasingly changing radicalisation drivers. In addition to these difficulties, LEAs within Germany are faced with the same problem as others in the European context: the federal structure requires exchange and cooperation between numerous authorities across national borders, which sometimes poses enormous legal and organisational challenges. A problem that INFINITY is trying to address.

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